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Reduced Laughter

Seriocomic Features and their Functions in the Book of Kings

By

Helen Paynter

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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

This work is dedicated to the glory of God, and to my family whom I love with all my heart: Stephen, Susanna, Louisa and Victoria.
And to those friends (you know who you are!) who told me, 'I read Kings last week and there was nothing funny in it,'—can I persuade you?

גַּם־בִּשְׂחוֹק יִכְאַב־לֵב וְאַחֲרִיתָהּ שִׂמְחָה תוּגָה
Even in laughter the heart is in pain, and the end of joy is grief.
Proverbs 14:13

לֵב שָׂמֵחַ יֵיטִב גֵּהָה
A merry heart brings good healing.
Proverbs 17:22a

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List of Abbreviations

ANE	Ancient Near East
BDB	Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
ESV	English Standard Version
HALOT	The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OED	Shorter Oxford English Dictionary
OT	Old Testament
VT	Vetus Testamentum
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

All translations from Hebrew, Greek, German, French and Latin are the author's own unless otherwise indicated.

Miscellaneous Conventions

References within the book of Kings, except in the case of possible ambiguity, are referred to within footnotes and parentheses thus: II. 6:4–6 (= II Kings 6 vv. 4–6).

To distinguish matters relating to the Northern Kingdom from those of Judah, the term 'Israelian' and 'Judaean' have been used, since the term 'Israelite' is frequently used to designate matters relating to the united nation of Israel.

With regard to the ambiguity which can surround the names Jehoram and Joram, the following convention has been adopted: 'Joram' refers to the king of Israel, 'Jehoram' to the king of Judah. Where I have quoted other authors who use a different convention, the names are standardised to this style and the change is indicated by the use of brackets, thus: J[]oram.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

> Next month, one of Britain's best-loved media institutions celebrates its 50th anniversary. There will be a huge party at one of the inner sanctums of the ruling elite, the Guildhall in London, an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, a new book that the PR agency would only let me glimpse after I signed a four-page, 23-clause confidentiality agreement . . . everything short of a 21-gun salute in Hyde Park.
>
> At this moment, one would hope that Britain's leading satirical publication, Private Eye, would leap up and start taking the piss out of the whole business. However, as you will have guessed, the celebrant on this occasion is (as the Eye always likes to say), er, Private Eye.
>
> Still, one of the glories of the magazine is that it is capable of sensing absurdity anywhere, even in itself. The party, says the invitation, is sponsored by the Worshipful Company of Hacks and Jokewrights.
>
> MARTIN ENGEL, *Financial Times*, 16 Sept 2011

⁘

The British satirical publication *Private Eye* pokes fun at politicians, celebrities, religious leaders, and the news of the day. It is sharp, caustic, irreverent—and important. Writing in a serious British newspaper, *The Guardian*, Martin Kettle named *Private Eye's* editor Ian Hislop as 'the single most influential voice in modern British politics'.[1] In the same piece, Kettle writes:

> And what is Hislop's principal message? Week in and week out, it is that most pretty much all [*sic*] politicians are corrupt, deluded, incompetent, second-rate and hypocritical. Hislop's message is delivered with enviable deftness and wit, and very often it is irresistible. But it is also good-naturedly merciless[. . .] There is never any sign that Hislop allows of [*sic*] exceptions. (Martin Kettle, *The Guardian*, 25 Aug 2011)

1 I wrote this paragraph on 7th January 2015, as news was breaking of eleven satirists murdered by Islamic fundamentalists in the Paris office of satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Satire does indeed have a serious import.

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Hislop himself, however, does admit of certain exceptions:

> I do have a residual belief that, if at all possible, you should try not to mock the weak. There seems to be a slight tendency in contemporary stand-up to have a go at the weak and say you're being edgy. You know, attacking the disabled. I think you should go for stronger targets. (Ian Hislop, quoted by Ginny Dougary *The Telegraph,* 29 Nov 2012)

In 2011, as we saw in the opening quotations, when *Private Eye* celebrated its own success and longevity with a glitzy party, the invitations stated, with tongue firmly in cheek, that the function was sponsored by 'The Worshipful Company of Hacks and Jokewrights'.

Ian Hislop and his colleagues at *Private Eye* stand in a long tradition of political satirists who expose the folly, duplicity and incompetence of the 'Establishment'. Nothing and no-one in a position of power are safe from their purview—even the magazine itself. Good satire is by no means trivial, though it will belittle; it is not frivolous, though it uses humour. And the best satirists prick the bubble of their own pomp.

That there is satire within the Bible is by no means an uncontroversial proposition. But it is my thesis that the central part of the book of Kings contains a specific form of semi-humorous writing, namely *seriocomic* writing. The effect of this is satirical, somewhat in the style of *Private Eye*. It speaks truth to power, it is important, and nobody is exempt from its scrutiny. It is also—at times—crude, violent and funny.

Such a proposal runs counter to much that has been written and believed about the Hebrew Bible in general, and Kings in particular. Therefore this introductory chapter seeks to consider the question of whether the search for such features within the Bible could conceivably be a fruitful one.

Humorous Genres within the Bible?

Many have either overlooked the possibility of finding elements of humour within the Hebrew Bible, or have considered the possibility and dismissed it as implausible. For example, A.N. Whitehead has said, 'the total absence of humour from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literature'.[2] He is by no means unique in his views.

2 Quoted in Radday, 1990, p. 21.

Objections are situated within two general areas: that there is an ethical incompatibility between humour and the serious nature of scripture; and, secondly, that ancient humour must be inaccessible to a modern audience, written as it was in a different language and out of an ancient, pre-modern culture. We will therefore consider first the ethics of humour and its relationship with truth, and then we will consider the validity of approaching the biblical text with the aim of discovering humour.

Humour, Truth and Gravity

Many charges have been levelled against the Bible, but I am not aware that frivolity has ever been one of them. Thus if humour is fundamentally incompatible with the serious pursuit of truth, then it is arguably inconceivable that it will be found within the Hebrew Bible, which is presumed by many, especially devout readers, to be a serious piece of writing.

Clearly, our worldview will influence the way in which we view humour. The ancient Greek philosophers regarded humour as ethically suspect. Plato (428–348 BCE) viewed laughter as arising from a sense of superiority directed towards the self-ignorant; it is therefore always alloyed with malice (Morreall, 1987, pp. 10–13). Aristotle (348–322 BCE) considered humour to be an attribute essential to a balanced life, but one that should be kept in check.[3] Van Heerden suggests that those who are imbued with the 'high-minded seriousness' of a Platonic or Aristotelian worldview may fail to admit any possibility of humour being a route to truth.[4] Likewise, he argues that the Western rationalist tradition tends to try to eliminate incongruity, rather than glory in it, the latter attitude being a valuable precursor to discovering humour (Van Heerden, 2001, p. 82).

This Aristotelean mind-set was influential for many centuries. Although a modern creation, Umberto Eco's blind monk Jorge reflects an established medieval dogma when he asserts that laughter is a moral evil: 'The spirit is serene only when it contemplates the truth and takes delight in good achieved,

3 'οἱ μὲν οὖν τῷ γελοίῳ ὑπερβάλλοντες βωμολόχοι δοκοῦσιν εἶναι καὶ φορτικοί, γλιχόμενοι πάντως τοῦ γελοίου, καὶ μᾶλλον στοχαζόμενοι τοῦ γέλωτα ποιῆσαι ἢ τοῦ λέγειν εὐσχήμονα καὶ μὴ λυπεῖν τὸν σκωπτόμενον· οἱ δὲ μήτ' αὐτοὶ ἂν εἰπόντες μηδὲν γελοῖον τοῖς τε λέγουσι δυσχεραίνοντες ἄγροικοι καὶ σκληροὶ δοκοῦσιν εἶναι'. (Aristotle, p. IV.8.3). (But those who overdo humour seem to be vulgar buffoons, striving after all wit, and trying to generate a laugh rather than to speak with decorum and avoid grieving the object of their mockery. But those who can never make a joke, nor put up with those who do, appear boorish and austere.)

4 By contrast, the Socratic school of philosophy sees the use of humour quite differently, as we shall see below.

and truth and good are not to be laughed at. This is why Christ did not laugh. Laughter foments doubt' (Eco, 1983, p. 132).

However, writing in the early nineteenth century, William Hazlitt defended the idea that ridicule could have a positive ethical purpose. 'Ridicule is the test of truth[...] it does not contain or attempt a formal proof of it, but owes its power of conviction to the bare suggestion of it[...] Ridicule fastens on the vulnerable points of a cause and finds out the weak sides of an argument[...] Before we can laugh at a thing, its absurdity must at least be open and palpable to common apprehension' (Hazlitt, 1841, p. 19).

Hazlitt points out the way in which humour, or ridicule, may be a *truth-seeking* device. This claim will be seen to be especially relevant when we consider the seriocomic (Menippean) form of literature, which Mikhail Bakhtin considers to be peculiarly suited to testing ultimate questions (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 115). Indeed, it will be my contention that there are certain forms of truth which are *only* accessible through the use of humour and similar devices.

In search of an ethics of laughter and humour, Ronald de Sousa (1987) notes that the morality of one's actions are judged not on their consequences (which are outside the control of the actor), but on their motives. Thus he suggests that the morality of jocularity should be evaluated according to the origin of the impulse. But the origin of the impulse is rooted in attitudes, not in beliefs. Beliefs may be assumed for the sake of argument; attitudes (he says) may not: they are *anhypothetical*. In other words, certain types of humour presuppose a relationship with truth. 'Laughter is revelatory of the nature of reality' (de Sousa, 1987, p. 246). Or, as Hazlitt expressed it, humour provides a 'fair test' as to what is the common consensus of truth (Hazlitt, 1841, p. 20). Indeed Søren Kirkegaard pointed out that a caricature (he might equally have said satire or parody) is only comical inasmuch as it *resembles* the original (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 461). So, although laughter may sometimes be ethically dubious, it can also serve a positive ethical purpose; indeed, it is sometimes ethically *necessary*. The key difference is whether the object of the humour is the powerful and abusive, or the weak and abused (Kuschel, 1994, pp. 123–24).

So much for the relationship between humour and truth. But if one views humour as the opposite of sadness or seriousness, rather than understanding these as complementary phenomena, it becomes less plausible that it will be found in the Bible. In response to arguments such as this, de Sousa argues closely that it is a category error[5] to imply that humour and more serious

5 The term 'category error' refers to a logical fallacy where two non-comparable things are considered together as if they were in the same category. For example, it is possible to calculate

emotions are incompatible (de Sousa, 1987).[6] Likewise, Van Heerden suggests that too narrow a view of humour, which confines its realm of action to frivolity, will necessarily constrain one's expectation that the Bible might contain such a literary form (Van Heerden, 2001, p. 76).

A study (Brenner, 1990) of the semantic range in Biblical Hebrew for the Hebrew lexemes related to humour has shown that its usage is biased heavily towards the tendentious[7] (irony, sarcasm and the like) rather than the lighthearted. This suggests that the Bible is using humour for a particular range of purposes, few, if any, of them frivolous.

In conclusion: it is at least possible that a religious text such as the Hebrew Bible might contain humour without compromising its serious intent. Reading for humour is not a pursuit of frivolity. If we are to attend to all that the text may have to offer us,[8] we have to be attentive to the possibility of humour within it.

How we Read the Bible

If it is theoretically possible that the Bible might contain humour, is it likely that we would be able to perceive it, reading in a culture so alien to that of its original hearers? Certainly such a possibility has been overlooked by the majority of biblical scholars. Yehuda Radday writes, 'The fathers of literary research in the Bible were German professors of the nineteenth century, and the state of the art to date is still deeply indebted to and influenced by them. But theologians in general are not noted for their wit' (Radday, 1990, p. 33).

A combination of over-familiarity with biblical texts, and the tendency to 'proof-text' with small, narrative-immolating selections, desensitises readers to plot twists and satire that they may otherwise readily identify (Van Heerden, 2001, pp. 77–79). This error may be committed by the believer in the pew; the parallel in scholarly circles is the temptation to dissect the text into its diverse sources, without allowing the points of junction and repetition or variance to surprise or shock. Many literary devices function at the 'macro' level of the text, and with the possible exception of wordplays, are likely to be overlooked with such a reading style.

---

the cost of a pedestrian crossing but not of a human life. To attempt to compare these is an example of a category error.

6 Indeed, many of the plays of William Shakespeare are good examples of the blending of the comedic and the tragic in high art; see for instance, the role of the porter in *Macbeth*, or of the gravedigger in *Hamlet*.

7 'Tendentious' is a term used by Sigmund Freud to describe jokes that are not innocent; they have a lustful or malicious motivation (Freud, 1960).

8 Cf. Zakovitch, 1990.

Naturally, our limited understanding of the original language of composition of the texts will restrict our ability to discern humour within them. 'Subtleties of humour are usually the last elements of a language that students are able to grasp' (Van Heerden, 2001, p. 80).[9] Melissa Jackson describes the task faced by a translator who wishes to be sensitive to humour within a text. 'While I would not concur that translators can very easily or effectively 'reproduce' biblical humour in another language, my experience has been that students of the Hebrew Bible can be communicators or explicators, if not strict translators, of biblical comedy' (Jackson, 2012, p. 32).

Additionally, the social, political and theological context of a text provides an important framework for reading any text well. 'In' jokes and satirical representations of minor historical figures may be overlooked, and the subtler nuances of ancient thought will not connect with modern understanding of the ideological *milieu*. It will be seen, however, that such an argument implies that we are more likely to under-diagnose humour than over-diagnose it.

Despite all the objections, Jackson remains sanguine about the possibility of finding the humour that the text contains, especially with repeated attentive reading, in which the hermeneutic technique functions in a spiral fashion. 'While one might need some guidance in 'translating' the first and possibly the second 'bits of humour', a competent reader will quickly acquire the tools and the acuity to begin independent discovery of more and more texts in which humour may be found' (Jackson, 2012, p. 32).

Additionally, Willie van Heerden points out that the humour of the Bible often lies at the higher level of the narrative, in the unexpected juxtaposition of ideas rather than of words, which offers hope that such humour may be retrieved in our reading (Van Heerden, 2001, p. 80).[10] A similar point was made centuries earlier by Cicero, who identified that humour could exist at the level of *things* as well as at *words. 'Duo enim sunt genera facetiarum, quorum alterum re tractatur, alterum dicto'*[11] (Cicero, p. 376). By extension of this idea, we see that humour within a text may be situational, lying in the events which they narrate (as, for example, the *narrative event* of Elijah's mocking words directed towards the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18); or it may be literary (such as, for

9 A similar point is made in Chotzner, 1905, p. 12.

10 A similar point is made by Elton Trueblood about the humour of Christ in Trueblood, 1964.

11 'For there are two kinds of wit, one where things are discussed and another where words are.'

instance the *narratorial device* in the same passage where the Baal prophets are described as 'limping' around the altar).

Nevertheless, linguistic and cultural difficulties remain and it would be arrogant and naïve to ignore the possibility that we will under-diagnose or over-diagnose humour in our texts.[12] Some criteria for testing our putative interpretations will be offered later in chapter 3.

Performative Aspect and Attentive Reading

A further plausibility barrier to the proposed investigation involves our understanding of the ancient approach to the narrative. We need to recall that there is good evidence that the texts of the Hebrew Bible were communicated orally, not merely as a means of transmission, but as an embodiment within the culture of the story which shaped the nation. Building on the analyses performed by himself and others of variant versions of biblical and other ancient near-Eastern texts, David Carr has shown how the text was held by the community, not necessarily by elite scribal groups (whose role, for example at Qumran, is undisputed), but as a narrative inscribed in the collective memories of the nation, particularly its scribal communities, with both textual and oral transmission (Carr, 2011, *passim*). So Carr describes how the ancient biblical texts were constructed in such a way as to facilitate performance, much as a musical score functions for a musician who already knows the piece, rather than a book the reader has never encountered before (Carr, 2005a, p. 4; cf. Person, 1998).[13]

This is important because some of the humour which we may find within our text is so subtle that it could only be identified by an attentive reader on multiple hearings or readings. For example: it may take many hearings of the Naboth narrative (1 Kgs 21) before it occurs to the listener that the description of Ahab with the unusual word סַר (sullen, ill-humoured, 1. 20:43 and 21:4) is reminiscent of the stubborn and rebellious son (בֵּן סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֶה) of Deuteronomy 21:18–19, and that there are a number of other points of similarity between

12 Radday gives an example where he considers Gunkel to have read humour into the Sarai-Abram account (Radday, 1990, p. 25); I encountered a far less learned example recently when my (then) ten year old daughter erupted with laughter as I read her the following words from Leviticus 19:33 'When an alien lives in your land . . .' This is a fine example of how the clash of cultural contexts may induce an impression of humour which is quite foreign (pun unintentional) to the text.

13 An example of this might be found in Exodus 13:1–16, where the annual Passover celebrations and consecration of the firstborn are intended to spark dialogue within the family. For example, 'In the future, when your son asks you "What is this?" say to him, "With a mighty hand YHWH brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery"' (v. 14).

the two texts. This train of thought might then result in the wry observation that in Deuteronomy it is the disobedient son who is stoned to death, whereas in Kings it is Naboth, exemplar of filial responsibility (1. 21:3) who receives that fate, while the 'sullen' Ahab benefits from his demise. This subtle, darkly humorous, allusion will only be apparent to the attentive reader or listener.

The concept of allusions, or intertexts, within a biblical text is well-established and does not need to be laboured here. Briefly, Julia Kristeva, who builds on Bakhtin's work, has argued that all writing takes place within a web of prior texts, and that all writing is consequently intertext (Kristeva, 1980). David Carr's work on the formation of the Hebrew Bible, already discussed above, reinforces the same notion, with particular attention to both written and oral forms of transmission. In particular, we should note that the identification of intertextual referentiality does not necessarily imply that the precursor text is available in its final, written form.

> Day after day, year after year, these future administrators would have ingested Israelite stories of creation, prophecies, psalms, and wisdom. These pre-Biblical texts [...] were imbued with an aura marking them as a unique means of access to a storied past. (Carr, 2005a, p. 158)

> These ancient texts were part of their vocabulary. They could cite or self-consciously "allude" to them, but often the influence of the instructional curriculum went far beyond that. (Carr, 2005a, p. 159)

Cynthia Edenburg has identified nine means of making intertextual reference: shared *motif*s, formulaic language, type scenes, genres (fixed literary forms), parallel accounts, inner-biblical (Midrashic) interpretation, allusion, quotation, and implicit citation (Edenburg, 2010). While Carr and Edenburg differ on their emphasis on the written and oral forms of precursor text, they agree that intertextuality demands a readership who have acquired 'literary or aural competence' (Edenburg, 2010, p. 142) by means of their 'education-enculturation' (Carr, 2005a, pp. 124–151), and that such a readership is exactly what the text expects.

Deliberate Concealment and Ambiguity

Sometimes a device such as humour within the text may have been deliberately concealed by the writer or redactor. There are two analogous devices which have been identified recently. First, there is a multiplicity of *paronomasias* (wordplays) within the Hebrew Bible, whose existence is unmarked by the usual devices which are generally used to foreground such linguistic features.

Knut Heim has suggested that the concealment of such paronomasias usually serves to permit a sort of authorial 'plausible deniability' in the case of cultural taboos such as sexual arousal (Heim, 2008, p. 926).[14]

Secondly, 'hidden polemic' is a term used by Yairah Amit (2000, pp. 93–94) to refer to instances where the reader is left with a particular impression after reading the text, but where the author has attempted both to conceal the subject of the polemic and yet at the same time to leave traces of it. Discovery of such a polemic does not detract from the explicit or implicit meaning of the text.

Polemics may be concealed for a number of reasons. First, they can be subversively persuasive, preparing the audience to accept a particular ideological stance. Secondly, the act of concealment may in itself be a powerful rhetorical device. Thirdly, and probably most importantly, a particular polemic may have to 'go underground' at some point in the textual history because of the prevailing political or theological climate (Amit, 2000, p. 97). Similarly, James Scott has described how situations of power imbalance always result in an 'official' conversation and a 'hidden' transcript, by which means the poor are able to express their frustration and contempt without being held up to the charge of insubordination (Scott, 1990, p. xii).

In order to avoid imagining the existence of fanciful and anachronistic hidden polemics, Amit offers a number of diagnostic criteria when a possible concealed polemic is suspected. These principles will form useful guidelines when we establish our own methodological criteria in chapter 3.

1. By definition, it should not be overt within the text.
2. However, there should be a plurality of signs within the text to indicate its presence; the evidence is cumulative. Herein lies the burden of proof.
3. The subject of the perceived polemic must be supported by other biblical passages. This criterion functions as a control, to avoid idiosyncratic interpretations.
4. The presence of the polemic should have been postulated at some point in interpretive history. This also acts as a control (Amit, 2000, pp. 93–97).

Both Heim and Amit's theses suggest that it is not implausible to imagine that an author or redactor would take some trouble to conceal humour if its effect

14 Peter Hatton has argued that Qohelet 10.20 'Even in your thoughts do not curse the king, nor in your bedrooms insult the rich; for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound, and a winged creature will report the word' is suggestive of the necessity of self-censorship due to possible spies (Hatton, 2008, p. 119).

might be seen as subversive. I shall be arguing that the seriocomic form of humour found in Kings is indeed subversive, and deliberate partial concealment may be part of the reason why it has not been wholly identified hitherto.

Somewhat akin to this idea is that of deliberate ambiguity within the text. This has been proposed by a number of scholars. For example, in an exploration of ambiguity within the psalter, Paul Raabe identifies ambiguity by means of lexical polyvalency, homophony, grammar and word order (Raabe, 1991). He offers three controls to prevent over-interpretation by enthusiastic readers. First, it should depend on Hebrew usage, not on the cognates within other semitic languages. Secondly, there should be other evidence within the context that both proposed meanings are plausible. Thirdly, the ambiguity should 'serve some weighty semantic and/or theological significance' (Raabe, 1991, p. 227). A similar approach has been used by Robert Chisholm Jr. (1993) in arguing for the presence of intentional ambiguity in Isaiah 24.

Outline of the Investigation

We have considered possible ethical and practical barriers to the identification within the text of humorous literary features, including satire. It has been shown that such devices may be a route to the investigation of truth, and that although their discovery is not easy, a number of scholars have claimed that it is possible. In the final part of this chapter I will outline the structure of the remainder of this book.

In chapter 2 we turn our attention to the book of Kings, and consider the approach of final-form criticism paired with attention to *Sitze im Leben* which is used in this study; and three methodological decisions I have made with regard to choice of text and attitude to the author. Some unexpected features found within the central portion of Kings (between approximately 1 Kgs 16 and 11 Kgs 13) are noted. This part of the book, which is probably of northern (Israelian) origin, contains the Elijah/Elisha narratives and most of the texts about the nearby nation of Aram. It poses a number of problems which contemporary scholarship has yet to answer fully, and these 'enigmas' are outlined.

In chapter 3 I outline two literary devices which will form the basis of my hermeneutic. My principal hermeneutical approach depends upon the work of a Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). An important part of Bakhtin's work[15] concerns the infiltration of literature by the social construct

15 The main works of Bakhtin which are relevant to my study are Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics; Rabelais and his World; The Dialogic Imagination and Speech Genres and Other Essays.

of carnival. Such literature, which he calls *seriocomic*, is playful, irreverent, multi-voiced, subversive and outrageous. In this chapter I will describe Bakhtin's work on seriocomic texts, and survey the use to which other OT scholars have put his thought, with reference to the work of authorities such as Barbara Green, David Valeta, and Kenneth Craig. I formulate a proposal that the central portion of Kings contains many elements of the seriocomic form. I then derive a list of diagnostic features, and four test criteria for identifying the presence of seriocomic features within biblical texts.

In the second part of chapter 3, I describe a literary device described by Lucien Dällenbach: the mirror within the text, or the *mise-en-abyme*. I propose that the central part of the book of Kings is rich in the florid seriocomic style and that the satire this produces is intensified by the use of literary mirroring in a number of places.

In chapter 4, the central part of the book of Kings is subjected to a close reading with attention to the presence of seriocomic features. It is shown that these chapters contain a rich proliferation of these florid incidents, which are found in far fewer numbers within the remainder of Kings. Parallel passages in Chronicles are also examined and found to be much less sensational in this way. The work of other scholars who have considered some of these texts from the same point of view is also considered; in particular Francisco García-Treto, Hugh Pyper and Stuart Lasine.

Chapter 5 considers the question of the function which the seriocomic features I have identified serve with regard to the prophets, particularly Elijah and Elisha. The seriocomic features of the text subvert the reader's attitude to Elisha, and then by use of mirroring, scorn is diverted towards Elijah. In this way, Elisha appears to function as an internal commentary on his predecessor. However the effect is not to invert the status of either prophet, but to subvert the prophetic role in more general terms.

In chapter 6, I return briefly to one of the puzzling elements from the central part of Kings which I identified in chapter 2. This is 1 Kings 19:15–17, where Elijah is commanded to anoint his own successor, and new kings over Israel and Aram. It is proposed that these verses open an *inclusio*, which closes with the demise of the same three characters in 11 Kings 13. The opening verses of this *inclusio* appear to introduce and foreground certain important themes including the prophetic role, the rise to prominence of the nation of Aram, and a parallelism between the three nations Aram, Israel and Judah.

Chapter 7 presents evidence for a complex web of symmetries, pairs, mirrors and parallels between the nations of Aram, Israel and Judah. It is shown that the text repeatedly directs the reader's scorn and mirth at Aram, but on each occasion the narrative turns, and disdain is diverted towards Israel. Further, multiple hints within the text invite us to draw parallels between Israel and

Judah; it is not, in the end, possible to critique the Northern Kingdom from the South with a sense of moral superiority.

In chapter 8, I subject my proposal to critique and evaluation, with particular attention to the pre-established points of 'test', and address some possible criticisms of my work.

CHAPTER 2

Some Unanswered Questions in the Book of Kings

> Consider Elisha. It says here that Elisha was so all-fired holy that merely touching his bones restored a dead man to life. But he was a baldheaded old coot, like myself. So one day some children made fun of his baldness, just as you girls do. So God personally interceded and sent two bears to tear forty-two small children into bloody bits. That's what it says—second chapter of Second Kings[...] The Bible is loaded with such stuff; read it and find out. Crimes that would turn your stomach are asserted to be either divinely ordered or divinely condoned.
>
> ROBERT HEINLEIN, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, 1961, p. 393

The book of Kings contains some of the best-known narratives in the Hebrew Bible; the quotation above shows that their popularity extends as far as modern cult fiction. Being well-known does not equate with being well-understood, however, and there are a number of questions which the text of Kings raises, which modern scholarship has not wholly resolved. Three of these are outlined in the second half of this chapter; these, I will later argue, are addressed by the hermeneutic used in this study. First, however, we will turn our attention to some methodological issues with regard to the approach to the text.

The Interplay of Diachronic and Synchronic Approaches to the Text

The compositional history of Kings is well-rehearsed in the scholarly literature. In brief, Martin Noth's theory of the Deuteronomist (Noth, 1943)—who had the particular priority of providing a theodicy for the catastrophe which had befallen the nations of Israel and Judah—has been enlarged, though not wholly superceded, by the work of Gerhard Von Rad, Hans Walter Wolff and Frank Moore Cross, among others.[1] Diachronically speaking, there is evidence for a number of layers of redaction: as a minimum, an optimistic, reforming Josianic edition, and an exilic editing offering what Nelson terms a doxology of judgement (Nelson, 1981, pp. 120–21).

1 See von Rad, 1958; Wolff, 1961; Cross, 1973.

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On the whole, the dual redaction theory has been found persuasive by commentators (e.g. Cogan, 2001, p. 97; DeVries, 2003, p. xxxiv), although some consider that the text contains additional traces of earlier, pre-Josianic editions (Sweeney, 2007, pp. 4–32; Halpern, 1991; Weippert, 1972; O'Brien, 1989).

This diachronic approach to the text is immensely helpful in drawing our attention to its development and historical background, but what it cannot provide is comment on the overall structure and sweep of its narrative and thence of its role in the theological, rhetorical, or other purpose of the larger text. For this reason, this investigation will be taking a synchronic, final-form critical, approach to the text; this is the study of the text as a whole for its literary properties.[2] At the forefront of this field in the area of biblical narrative are Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg.[3] Alter has described the literary analysis of a text as paying 'minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else' (Alter, 1981, p. 12). We have already noted that much humour is found within the larger scale of the text,[4] so we might expect that any approach which tends towards its atomisation will mitigate the possibility of identifying such elements.

However, understanding something of the nature of this multi-layered compositional process in Kings is important background to help us understand the milieu of our text and its theological priorities. If it contains subversive voices, it is not unlikely that they will be directed towards the prevailing powers at the time of composition or redaction, and hence, perhaps, towards the ideology dominant within the author's socio-political milieu. History has an important role in commenting upon the present; we can use the past as a parable to represent the present, or as a myth to dialogue with it. So events within the redactor's own history might plausibly have been of interest in his own time.

In *The Narrative Covenant* (Damrosch, 1987, p. 325), David Damrosch describes the text as a 'purposeful patchwork', where the layers of different sources have been redacted into a coherent whole.[5] Reading the final form

2 I use the term 'final-form criticism' rather than 'literary criticism' because of the ambiguity of the latter expression. 'Literary criticism' could be used to refer to the literary qualities of the text: its structure, characterization, and so on; but the term can also be used to embrace all the critical approaches to the text: source, form and so on. Similar terms are 'discourse analysis', used by some scholars such as Meir Sternberg, and 'narrative criticism', used by Jerome Walsh in his commentary on 1 Kings (Walsh, 1996).

3 See in particular: Alter, 1981; Sternberg, 1985.

4 Van Heerden, 2001, p. 80.

5 Cf. the approach taken by Robert Alter towards the equally multi-authored text of Genesis: 'One need not claim that Genesis is a unitary artwork [. . .] in order to grant it integrity as a book. There are other instances of works of art that evolve over the centuries, like the

of the text with attention to historical criticism enriches the reading process, while destabilising its preconceived meanings. Thus the interplay of historical and narrative criticism becomes a rich medium for textual interpretation.[6] This will be considered further with regard to Bakhtinian dialogism and polyphony in the following chapter.

Methodological Decisions

The proposed final-form approach to Kings makes three particular methodological decisions. First, despite the general tendency of publishing houses to offer separate commentaries on I and II Kings, they are here regarded as a single integrated text.[7] The book of Kings was first divided into two with the Latin Vulgate edition in the fourth century CE. Within Jewish tradition the Hebrew text was undivided until the sixteenth century, although the LXX divided Kings into two parts (as parts 3 and 4 of Reigns) long before this (Zevit, 2004, p. 668). For this reason I have chosen throughout this study to refer to the 'book of Kings' by which I mean the entire document of I and II Kings.

Second, this study will be based upon the MT as found in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, based on the Leningrad Codex.[8] This decision is consistent with the practice of other scholars reading Kings in a literary framework.[9] An important benefit of using the Hebrew text is that attention may be paid to

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cathedrals of medieval Europe, and are the product of many hands, involving an elaborate process of editing, like some of the greatest Hollywood films.' (Alter, 1996, p. xlii)

6 How successfully Damrosch has achieved this is, however, open to doubt (Van Seters, 1990).

7 Marvin Sweeney describes I and II Kings as 'a coherent, self-contained literary unit' without feeling the need to offer supporting argument (Sweeney, 2007, p. 1). Robert Cohn describes the break between the books as 'arbitrary' and sees the second book as a direct continuation of the first (Cohn, 2000, p. xi).

8 Pending the publication of the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* for Kings, the BHS probably represents the best textual tradition of the MT.

9 E.g. Walsh, 1996, p. xii; Cohn, 2000, p. xv; García-Treto, 1990. Cf. Simon DeVries's appraisal, 'It goes without saying that, even where OG [Old Greek] is clearly preserved or can be conjectured, it does not automatically offer a reading superior to that of the MT. Codex B shows a variety of inner-Greek corruptions, as well as numerous readings where (1) its Hebrew *Vorlage* may have been inferior to that of the MT, or (2) its translator(s) did an inferior job of rendering the Hebrew, as compared with the MT.' (DeVries, 2003, p. lviii)

The type of analysis which my study requires generally relates more to narrative incidents and literary patterns than to minute textual details. While there are occasional large variants between the LXX and the MT, the majority of differences are very minor (Talmon, 1975, p. 326). Additionally, within the texts of my concern, the Greek versions are largely supportive of the MT, so the problem of significant textual deviance need not detain us unduly. The main example of difference between the MT and the LXX in these texts is the position of I Kings 21 (= 3 Reigns 20), which in the LXX is found before I Kings 20 (= 3 Reigns 21).

word-play and sound play.[10] A second advantage relates to one particular area of my study: the presence of linguistic diversity (heteroglossia). I shall argue that the Central Section of Kings is peppered with Northernisms, particularly in Elisha's direct speech. Clearly it would not be possible to identify such features within the Greek versions.[11]

The third methodological decision is a willingness to attribute to the author[12] a considerable subtlety of craft and purpose. This rests on the determination to be attentive primarily to the text itself. Final-form criticism sets out to understand the narrative, not the realities behind it; to read the text as *an intentional act of communication* requiring interpretative effort by the reader (Sternberg, 1985, p. 15). The skill of this author who has something to tell us is robustly defended by Sternberg: 'It is condescending, not to say arrogant [to say that] the child is always wiser than its parent, that wit correlates with modernity, that a culture which produced the Bible [. . .] was incapable of going below the

10 Cf., for example, the discussion in Gray, 1970, pp. 44–46. Although it seems likely that the MT derives from a later *Vorlage* than the LXX, it remains indisputable that Hebrew is the original language of composition, and so we have the best chance of detecting such linguistic features in the untranslated version. Of course the vowels represent a reading tradition much later than the consonantal text. For this reason any conclusions based on assonance will necessarily be tentative. The relationship between the MT and the LXX is complex, and is the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. The reader is directed to the work of David Carr (2011), Frank Moore Cross (1975), and Ellis R. Brotzman (1994). The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Judaean desert in the middle of the last century provided an opportunity for the extant texts to be compared with much more ancient ones. It is not possible to generalise about the similarity of these texts to the LXX or the MT, but the small fragments of Kings which have so far come to light support the text of the MT (DeVries, 2003, p. liv).

11 In view of the argument made in chapter 1 that certain humorous and subversive elements of the text might prove too controversial for pious readers, it is interesting to note the work of L. St. John Thackeray with regard to the LXX. (Thackeray's work, though early, remains influential: see, for example, Tov 1999, p. 491.) He argues that Reigns (= Samuel and Kings) shows evidence of two translators from the Hebrew to the Greek. The earlier translator ignored the texts of what Thackeray terms the 'Decline and Fall' of Judah: that is, the faults of David, and the decline of the monarchy. Thackeray suggests that is because this translator was uncomfortable with the 'unedifying' contents of these sections (Thackeray, 1923, pp. 16–28). This is consistent with other places where the LXX appears to have 'smoothed over' uncomfortable passages in the MT (see, for example, Hatton, 2008, pp. 103–4). This proposal that the original translator of Kings found certain passages distasteful supports the thesis I shall be developing that many of these passages are written in a disrespectful, parodic style.

12 The question of 'authorship' of a multi-source text is complex and will be considered in chapter 8.

surface of its own product' (Sternberg, 1985, p. 10). The subtlety of the author is an important prerequisite to the conclusions drawn at the end of my investigation, and it is therefore an assumption we will revisit in more detail later.

The Central Portion of Kings

We will now turn our attention to the text of Kings, and in particular, to its central section. The first part of Kings deals with the reign of Solomon, with the building of the temple, and the succeeding narratives of the division of the kingdom after his death. From about 1 Kings 14:21, the writing then settles into a largely formulaic depiction of the successive kings of Judah and Israel, characterised by a series of 'regnal accounts'. For example:

> So Rehoboam son of Solomon reigned in Judah. Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for seventeen years in Jerusalem[. . .] And the remainder of the deeds of Jeroboam, and all that he did, are they not written on the scroll of the deeds of the days of the kings of Judah? (1. 14:21,29).

These so-called 'regnal formulae' continue for the kings of Israel until the Assyrian conquest of Israel in II Kings 17, and for the kings of Judah until the fall of Jerusalem in II Kings 25, with each account summarising the life of the king, whether he did good or evil in the eyes of YHWH, and how he compared with Jeroboam (northern kings) or David (kings of Judah). However, in the middle of these formulaic regnal accounts there is a florid eruption of the narratives of Elijah, Elisha and the Aram cycle, which fall between 1 Kings 17, where Elijah appears, and II Kings 13, where Elisha dies. These will form the focus of attention for the present study.

Beloved of Sunday school children everywhere, these stories abound with wonders, drama, insults and gore. But to a more sophisticated readership, they raise some significant questions which much academic ink has not fully succeeded in answering. We will consider four of these in turn.

Enigma: The Ethical Content of the Prophets' Actions

In the central portion of Kings, there are a number of instances where the actions of Elijah or Elisha appear ethically ambiguous. There is no more striking example than in II Kings 2:23–25, where Elisha curses some youths who have mocked him; and two she-bears emerge from the woods and maul forty-two of them. This passage has raised questions to readers both naïve and learned,

faithful and sceptical; as shown by the quotation at the beginning of this chapter from Robert Heinlein's book *Stranger in a Strange Land.* Commentators through the years have grappled with this text without reaching consensus on the matter. To illustrate the problematicity of this text, I now offer a brief summary of its reception history. The commentators I have selected are chosen to demonstrate the approaches taken at various points in history.

The church fathers generally read Kings typologically, and with particular attention to concerns peculiar to their day. So Caesarius of Arles (460–542 CE) sees in the massacre of the youths a prefiguring of the fall of Jerusalem as judgement on the Jews:

> What does "Go up, you baldhead" mean except: Ascend the cross on the site of Calvary? Notice further, brothers, that just as under Elisha forty-two boys were killed, so forty-two years after the passion of our Lord two bears came, Vespasian and Titus, and besieged Jerusalem. Also consider, brothers, that the siege of Jerusalem took place on the Paschal solemnity. Thus, by the just judgment of God the Jews who had assembled from all the provinces suffered the punishment they deserved, on the very days on which they had hung the true Elisha, our Lord and Savior, on the cross. (Caesarius of Arles, c.540)

In the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) uses the stories of Kings, with many other biblical texts, as source material for his magisterial treatise *Summa Theologica.* In this way he advances the interpretation of the text from the allegorical to an investigation into the literal sense of the text, with attention to the theological meaning. Thus, as he engages with the objections and counter-arguments concerning the lawfulness of vengeance, he writes:

> Sometimes a wrong done to a person reflects on God and the Church: and then it is the duty of that person to avenge the wrong. For example, Elias made fire descend on those who were come to seize him (4 Kings i); likewise Eliseus cursed the boys that mocked him (4 Kings ii); and Pope Sylverius excommunicated those who sent him into exile (XXIII, Q. iv, Cap. Guilisarius). But in so far as the wrong inflicted on a man affects his person, he should bear it patiently if this be expedient. (Aquinas, 1274, p. CVIII.I (p. 66))

The Talmudic Jewish tradition likewise understands the episode to be pointing to a truth beyond itself, here concerning hospitality and the miraculous work of the prophet.

> Said R. Yohanan in the name of R. Meir, 'Whoever does not escort someone or is not escorted is as if he sheds blood. For if the men of Jericho had given an escort to Elisha, he would not have called up the bears against the children' [. . .]
>
> Rab and Samuel: One of them said, 'It was a miracle'.
>
> The other said, 'It was a miracle within a miracle'.
>
> The one who said, 'It was a miracle' held that while there was a forest, there were really no bears.
>
> The one who said, 'It was a miracle within a miracle' maintained that there was no forest and there were no bears. Quoted in the Babylonian Talmud Sota 9:5, VII. 8.A–B; 11.B–E. (Neusner, 2011, pp. 236–7)

By the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, commentators are drawing out the theological priorities of the (assumed single) writer of Kings; that is, his interest in religious ceremonies and festivals, and his orientation towards Judah (Clarke, 1832; Moulton, 1896). Their reading of the Central Section would be familiar to uncritical modern readers, in that they assume the literality of the narratives, and have a particular concern to exonerate the prophets from any suspicion of misdemeanour. For example, in their comments on the mauling of the forty-two youths by the she-bears, Matthew Henry and Adam Clarke write:

> Elisha heard their taunts, a good while, with patience; but at length the fire and holy zeal for God was kindled in his breast. (Henry, 1708, p. 524)

> This [name-calling] was blasphemy against God; and their punishment (for they were Beth-elite idolaters) was only proportioned to their guilt [. . .] It was no petulant humour of the prophet that caused him to pronounce this curse; it was God alone. (Clarke, 1832)

In particular, these pre-modern scholars do not identify any irony or satire within the larger text, except within the words of Micaiah to Ahab, 'Go up and succeed, and YHWH will give it into the hand of the king' (1. 22:15), where irony is understood to be present, once again to absolve the prophet of any charge of wrong-doing (Clarke, 1832; Davies, 1875, p. 117).

With the advent of Higher Criticism, different tools for understanding the text are developed, such as source, form and redaction criticism. For the first time, commentators felt at liberty to express doubt about the historicity of the narrated events. Scholarly attention became focussed on the variable textual

witness;[13] the linguistic details of the text;[14] the diverse sources making up the final composite text;[15] and the use of established literary forms within the text.[16]

Perhaps because of this move away from historicity, few scholars expressed concern about the ethical nature of Elisha's actions. For example, the form critic Alexander Rofé describes the narrative of the boys and the bears as a *simple legenda*: a short miracle story which forms a 'minor redemptive act' but bears no historico-theological meaning (Rofé, 1970). On the other hand, using a taxonomy constructed with particular attention to the purpose of the pericope, Simon DeVries classifies the bear story as a 'Power Demonstration Narrative': 'a marvelous story which exemplifies charismatic power to demonstrate the *exemplary prophet*' (DeVries, 1978, p. 53, emphasis mine). Also looking beyond the form to the purpose of the story, Marvin Sweeney and Lissa Wray Beal both agree that it serves to authenticate Elisha as Elijah's true successor (Sweeney, 2007, p. 275; Wray Beal, 2014, pp. 306–7). Robert Cohn's literary-sensitive reading demonstrates that the mauling of the youths is part of a chiasm, where the outward journey of Elijah and Elisha is reflected by Elisha's solitary return journey (Cohn, 2000, p. 11).[17] However, Cohn fails on this occasion to derive any particular hermeneutical benefit from this analysis. Even Walter Brueggemann, whose subtle interpretation of the Elijah-Elisha narratives we will consider later (Brueggemann, 2001a; Brueggemann, 1987), does not express unease at Elisha's actions here. 'The incident puts Israel on notice. This Elisha is dangerous and is not to be trifled with, not by small boys, not by kings, not by anybody, for he has the spirit of Elijah' (Brueggemann, 2000, p. 299).

A little more discomfort with Elisha's behaviour is expressed by some modern commentators, however. Richard Nelson attributes our dissatisfaction to the gap between our own sensibilities and those of the original audience (Nelson, 1987, p. 161). T.R. Hobbs rather uneasily comments that it demonstrates 'excess', but offers no explanation for this (Hobbs, 2002, p. 24).[18] John

13 E.g. Montgomery & Gehman, 1951.

14 E.g. Montgomery & Gehman, 1951; Gray, 1970.

15 E.g. DeVries, 2003; Sweeney, 2007.

16 E.g. DeVries, 2003.

17 Strictly this should be termed a palistrophe because of its length. A palistrophe like this causes some problems for those who would see the stories as deriving from multiple sources without the intervention of an artful narrator. Cf., for example, the discussion by Gordon Wenham on the Flood narrative, where he argues for the unity of the text on the basis of a palistrophe (Wenham, 1987, pp. 156–57).

18 However, Hobbs likens Elisha's actions here with Elijah's a few chapters earlier in II Kgs 1, and here, he sees Elijah's calling down of fire to consume Ahaziah's soldiers as serving a theological purpose. 'In the broader view of the history of Israel presented in the OT, this

Gray suggests that this narrative, along with several others,[19] derives from 'dervish' prophetic groups, whose zeal to enhance the status of the prophet in fact back-fired and impaired it (Gray, 1970, p. 467).

It will be seen, therefore, that although the prophet's outrageous actions appear to evoke in many readers a feeling of discomfort, this is generally soothed away by apologetical inclusions (Elisha reasoned with the boys for a long while), discounted through source-critical explanations (the 'dervish' narratives are an insertion), or minimised through contextual analysis (we do not have the same mind-set as the book's original readers). Any or all of these may be true, but none of the mainstream commentators appears to have considered the possibility that the reader's discomfort is *intended* by the text.

However, a small handful of modern scholars is starting to explore the possibility that the prophets are represented by the text in less-than-idealised terms in Kings. These include Wesley Bergen, Yairah Amit, R.P. Carroll, and feminist scholars Mary Shields and Gershon Hepner. These readings are considered more fully in chapter 5. With regard to the incident with the bears, David Marcus has identified this as one of four pieces of what he terms 'anti-prophetic satire' in the Hebrew Bible[20] (Marcus, 1995). Wesley Bergen takes what he terms a 'narratological' approach similar to, but more extensive than, Robert Cohn's. He has suggested that the story leaves us with only two choices: to question the propriety of YHWH, or to question the propriety of Elisha (Bergen, W.; 1999, p. 73).

The brief overview above has perhaps illustrated the diversity of interpretations placed upon this difficult narrative, and the unease which it may engender; a disquiet which has not been fully assuaged by traditional methods of reading the story.

There are other instances in these narratives where it appears that the author invites us to question the ethical content of the prophet's actions. For example, Elisha conspicuously fails to invoke the name of YHWH on a number of occasions when he performs his dramatic signs. We will consider these in chapter 5, where I will argue that my hermeneutic sheds additional light on these texts.

Additionally in Kings we find multiple incidents of a prophet speaking a deceptive word. In 1 Kings 13:18 an unnamed prophet (implicitly a prophet

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cannot be construed as a power struggle, but rather a conflict over the very survival of Israel as the people of God and the role of the prophets in that crisis. It is in this light that the terrible excesses of the narrative are to be seen.' (Hobbs, 2002, p. 13)

19 II. 2:1–18, 19–22; 4:38–41, 42–44; 6:1–7; 13:20f.

20 The other three are Balaam (Num 22:21–35), the lying prophet (1 Kgs 13), and Jonah.

of YHWH) deceives another prophet to his death.[21] In I Kings 22:13–28 the prophet Micaiah appears to lie to the king of Israel. II Kings 3:19 shows Elisha prophesying clear victory to Israel, a prediction which is not (cf. v. 27) fully realised. Finally, in II Kings 8:10, Elisha appears to incite Hazael not only to deceive, but also to murder his king. Indeed, at times, it appears that it may be YHWH himself who is at work behind the deception. Commentators vary in their explanation for these events, or sometimes fail to comment on any dissonance altogether.[22] Perhaps the most satisfying accounts are given by those who are willing to live with the tension or ambiguity. Thus:

> [Of I Kgs 13] The text broaches no exploration of the motivation for the deception; the issue is simply beyond the narrative point. (Wray Beal, 2014, p. 193)

> [Of I Kgs 22] The narrator does not tell us but leaves us with the paradoxical, almost titillating picture of a prophet who has just declared his absolute loyalty to Yahweh's words apparently prophesying falsely. (Walsh, 1996, p. 349)

> [Of II Kgs 8] The storyteller had no difficulty with a man of God involved in international political affairs, sometimes dealing underhandedly. (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 90)

Some of these narratives will be considered in more depth in chapter 3; for now, we note that there are several places where the ethics of YHWH or his prophet is called into question by the text, and that this poses a problem which has not been fully explained by the traditional commentators.

Enigma: The Prominence of Israel and the Peculiar Privilege of Aram

It is widely considered in modern scholarship that the redactions of Kings are made from the perspective of the Southern Kingdom.[23] This does not, of course, mean that the book is uncritical of Judah, but that its lens for the dual trajectories of judgement and promise is Judaean. As Steven Holloway summarises it: there is a 'right' cult, exemplified by Solomon and the mainly Judaean

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21 This passage falls outside the central section of Kings.

22 For example, T.R. Hobbs does not concede any problem with Elisha's incompletely fulfilled prophecy in II. 3:19 (Hobbs, 2002, p. 38), or with the double oracle of Elisha in II. 8:10 (p. 98).

23 E.g. Cross, 1973, pp. 278ff.; Gray, 1970, pp. 9–14; Wellhausen, 1882, p. 279.

cultic reformers Asa, Jehu, Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah; and a 'wrong' cult, characterised by the sin of the northern kings Jeroboam and Ahab, and the southern kings who are modelled on them, Ahaz and Manasseh. Similarly there is a 'right' centre of worship (Jerusalem) and a 'wrong' axis (Bethel/Dan in the north). The dynastic promise to David in II Samuel 7:11–13, though recast as conditional in I Kings 9:4–7,[24] remains a central theological theme (Holloway, 1992; c.f. Cross, 1973, p. 279). Thus the concerns of Judah are considered to predominate throughout the text.

However, the Elijah/Elisha narratives are mainly set within the northern kingdom, and many of them contain no reference to Judah at all. Likewise, the stories of the Aram cycle largely interact with Israel rather than Judah. Based on their subject matter and linguistic peculiarities, they probably originated in the north (Rendsburg, 2002, *passim*; Gray, 1970, pp. 29–32; Cogan, 2001, pp. 92–94; Burney, 1903, pp. 207ff.; Montgomery & Gehman, 1951, pp. 39–41).[25]

What function, then, do these northern narratives serve in this text? Indeed, some commentators appear to think that they got in by authorial oversight. John Gray, for example, suggests that the miracles of the axe head and the widow's oil, for instance, are trivial and 'indicate an authority of little discrimination' (Gray, 1970, pp. 29–30). In contrast, Marvin Sweeney and Francisco García-Treto, building on the work of Frank Moore Cross referred to above (Cross, 1973, pp. 278–85), have both shown the subtle way in which the nation of Israel (in particular, the house of Ahab) functions as a foil to critique the house of Judah (García-Treto, 1990, p. 61; Sweeney, 2007, p. 11). I will develop this idea further in chapter 7.

Aram[26] is named a few times within the early portion of Kings, mainly within brief reference to conquests and battles (e.g. I. 11:23–25, 15:18–21). However, in the central section of the book the characterization of the nation and her kings becomes much fuller. Despite the frequent hostilities between

24 Cf. Psalm 132:11–12.

25 The linguistic peculiarities of the Elijah/Elisha narratives are discussed in chapter 4.

26 A summary of the historical data on Aram may be found in Pitard, 1996 and Mazar, 1962. The Arameans seem to have risen to nation status around the end of the twelfth century, expanding over the next hundred years to occupy land throughout the Syrian desert. This expansion brought them into conflict with Israel. References to Aram in Kings appear to denote the specific nation-state of Aram-Damascus, a kingdom which first appears in historical documents when it is subjugated by David in II Samuel 8:5–6. In the time of Solomon, Rezon, son of one of the Arameans defeated by David, seizes Damascus from Israelian control and takes the throne for himself (I. 11:23–24). From this time forward, Aram is a periodic irritant to Israel and Judah, alternately harrying and treating with these nations.

them, relations between the nations of Aram and Israel appear to be intermittently cordial rather than exclusively hostile, as the central passage in Kings demonstrates repeatedly, unlike Moab, for instance.[27] So, for example, Aram is an enemy, pagan state, but its king requests—and obtains—favours for a senior army officer (II Kgs 5);[28] the king of Israel throws a banquet for an Aramean raiding party (II Kgs 6); and the prophet of YHWH (Elisha) appears to enjoy a privileged status in the court of Aram, culminating in the unofficial appointing of their new dynastic line (II Kgs 8).

This less than hostile attitude between Aram and Israel[29] has not attracted the attention of commentators, although a general comment is sometimes made about the sovereignty of YHWH over the nations (e.g. Wray Beal, 2014, pp. 336ff.; 345ff.). What is Aram's purpose, in literary terms? This remains one of the unanswered questions raised by this text.

Enigma: The Command-Prophecy formula in 1 Kings 19:15–17

After Elijah's triumph on Mount Carmel, and his subsequent dejected flight to Horeb, YHWH appears to him and charges him with a threefold task: to anoint two kings and a new prophet. Accompanying this task is a prophecy:[30] that these three individuals would conduct a purge against the worshippers of Baal.

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27 Like the Arameans, the Moabites were also genealogically related to Israel, through Lot (Gen. 19:30–38). However, I can detect no hint of ambivalence towards this nation in the text of Kings. See for example, II. 11:7 where Chemosh, the god of the Moabites is described as שִׁקֻּץ [monster, abomination]; II Kgs 3, where the king of Moab is utterly routed in battle and sacrifices his own son in a desperate bid for victory; II. 23:13, where the altar of Chemosh of the Moabites is torn down in Josiah's reforms.

28 It could be argued that the particular instance of the king of Aram requesting, or demanding, healing for Naaman in II Kgs 5 might be explained if a vassal-overlord relationship is in force at the time. However, this would appear to be at odds with the ongoing activity of Aramean raiding parties into Israelian territory (v. 2), and the large gift which the king of Aram sends (v. 5).

29 Deuteronomy 26:5 ('A wandering Aramean was my father') has proved a problem text for some scholars, who have found the emphasis on the patriarchal association between Israel and Aram surprising in the light of hostile relations between Israel and Aram by the time of the Deuteronomist (Christensen, 2002, p. 637; Tigay, 1996, p. 240; Gibson, 1961, pp. 23off.). However it appears to me that these commentators have overstated the hostility of relations between Aram and Israel. If this argument proves convincing, the text no longer poses this problem.

30 The imperative verbal forms in verse 15 (לֵךְ שׁוּב) give way in verse 17 to the imperfect (יָמִית . . . יָמִית) following the *weqatal* וְהָיָה. Clearly this has chronological effect (it shall come to pass) so the phrase appears to function in a predictive sense.

1 Kings 19:15–17, which I shall designate the 'Command-Prophecy' because of this dual effect, reads:

> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵךְ שׁוּב לְדַרְכְּךָ מִדְבַּרָה דַמָּשֶׂק וּבָאתָ וּמָשַׁחְתָּ אֶת־חֲזָאֵל לְמֶלֶךְ עַל־אֲרָם:
> וְאֶת יֵהוּא בֶּן־נִמְשִׁי תִּמְשַׁח לְמֶלֶךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־אֱלִישָׁע בֶּן־שָׁפָט מֵאָבֵל מְחוֹלָה תִּמְשַׁח לְנָבִיא תַּחְתֶּיךָ:
> וְהָיָה הַנִּמְלָט מֵחֶרֶב חֲזָאֵל יָמִית יֵהוּא וְהַנִּמְלָט מֵחֶרֶב יֵהוּא יָמִית אֱלִישָׁע:
>
> YHWH said to him 'Go, return to your way to the wilderness of Damascus and when you arrive, anoint Hazael king over Aram.
> And anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-Meholah as prophet instead of you.
> Those escaping from the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and those escaping from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill'.

These verses, which do not appear to fit well within the text at this point (Cogan, 2001, p. 457), have posed a problem to commentators for a long time. Scholarly concern seems to centre on two issues. First, as is widely pointed out, Elijah anoints none of the three individuals mentioned here.[31] He appoints Elisha as his successor, although there is no record of any anointing. It is Elisha, not Elijah, who prophesies (and apparently provokes) Hazael's coup, but does not anoint him. The only one of the three who is subsequently anointed is Jehu, and this is performed neither by Elijah nor Elisha, but by an unnamed deputy.

James Montgomery suggests that this is because something of the Elisha record has been retrospectively credited to Elijah, to bolster his reputation as the 'one perfect man' (Montgomery, 1951, p. 315). The problems with this are: first, it necessitates a redactor who is subtle enough to wish to modify prophetic records for an ideological purpose, but who is too obtuse to realise the narrative problems he is thereby introducing. Secondly, this proposed solution does not answer the problem that neither Hazael nor Jehu was anointed by Elisha, either; and of course, it leaves us with the problem of Elisha's own name having been inserted into the record, as he presumably could not anoint himself. Finally, as I shall argue later, it does not appear to me to be the purpose of the text to bolster the reputation of either Elisha or Elijah.

By contrast, John Gray suggests that this commission to Elijah is given at the end of his life, and the imperative is thereupon transferred to Elisha (Gray, 1970, p. 411). This does help to explain one problem with the narrative, the

31 E.g. Cogan, 2001, p. 457; Gray, 1970, p. 411; Walsh, 1996, p. 278.

failure of Elijah to obey the command; although we are still left with the other problems, as outlined above and below. Additionally, the narrative does not describe Elijah as dying suddenly and unexpectedly, but of being taken up into heaven, implicitly because he has finished what YHWH has given him to do. Gray's alternative explanation; that this is a 'pious fiction to justify the high-handed methods of Elisha', does not appear to me to solve any of the aforementioned problems either.

Mordechai Cogan suggests that the existence of these two verses within the Elijah narrative is indicative of an earlier, independent source (vv. 15–18), juxtaposed with a later source (vv. 19–21), because 'a late tradent would hardly have developed and passed on to posterity prophecies that were contrary to acknowledged "facts"' (Cogan, 2001, p. 457). The comments above about a clumsy redactor would appear to be equally applicable to this argument, too. Cogan's hypothesis may well be true, but I do not feel it offers a complete explanation. However Cogan makes the helpful observation that these verses may represent the effective conclusion of Elijah's ministry, and form a break point to introduce and anticipate the work of Elisha (Cogan, 2001, p. 457). Extending this, I shall argue in chapter 6 that these verses form the beginning of an inclusio which is not concluded until the death of Hazael in II Kings 13.

The second question which appears to exercise scholars is the unprecedented instruction to anoint a prophet. For example, John Gray (1970, p. 411) comments, 'The anointing of [Elijah's] prophetic successor Elisha is extraordinary. There is no other case of the conferring of prophetic authority by anointing, though priests were anointed'. However, this issue is probably explained by Gray, who helpfully proposes that the word משׁח here carries the implication simply of being 'set apart' rather than physically anointed with oil (Gray, 1970, p. 411).[32] Walsh also offers this explanation, but in addition suggests that the text may be deliberately drawing attention to Elijah's disobedience (Walsh, 1996, p. 278).

For the same reasons that source-critical scholars have found these verses disjunctive, I am inclined to consider them significant from a literary point of view. They name individuals who will not appear for years, in narrative terms; or chapters, in literary terms.[33] However, my questions relate to their narrative significance within the larger text.

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32 Gray's suggestion is contested by Mordecai Cogan, who does not, however, provide any reasons for his disagreement (Cogan, 2001, p. 454).

33 Even if this event takes place at the very end of Ahab's reign, his son Ahaziah reigns for two years (I. 22:51), and his second son Joram for twelve years (II. 8:25) before the coup of Jehu terminates the Omride dynasty.

First, why would Elijah, prophet of YHWH in Israel, be charged with appointing a king of Aram? As far as I can determine such interference is unprecedented, and it would seem likely that this question would have been important to the text's intended readers. Surprisingly, the scholarly literature does not appear to have grappled with this question. Perhaps the closest biblical equivalent is the metaphorical anointing of the pagan king Cyrus to do YHWH's will (Isa 45:1), at a much later point in history (though not necessarily a later point of textual construction, of course). Jerome Walsh likens the command to anoint Hazael with the miraculous activity of Elijah in chapter 17, where the divinely ordained drought appears to have extended into Baal's Sidonian territory (Walsh, 1996, p. 277). However, the local activity of a prophet in one widow's house, and a Sidonian drought with no indication of Sidonian understanding of YHWH's role in it, does not seem to me to equate to the highly political and extremely prominent activity of king-making.

Secondly, why would a pagan king, Hazael, be given the task of eliminating Baal worship? Clearly the idea of a pagan nation being YHWH's instrument of punishment upon Israel is familiar within the Deuteronomic writings (e.g. Jdg 16:6–9), and is also found in the prophets (e.g. Isa 47:5–6). Not unfamiliar, either, is the idea of the pagan nation being commissioned by God for the task (e.g. Isa 7:18–20). Yet there is something unusual about this task which God gives to Elijah. Babylon, Assyria and the nations summoned against Israel in Judges all act indiscriminately, in standard martial fashion, whether raid, siege or deportation. What is unexpected in this passage is the implication of a particular mission for Hazael; the idea that Hazael will be specifically acting against Baalism, rather than harrying the people of Israel in general. Even Cyrus, the pagan king called by God to 'rebuild my city and send forth my exiles' (Isa 45:13) appears ignorant of the divine purpose of his role: 'though you do not know me' (Isa 45:4,5).

Thirdly, why is there apparently no evidence within the text that this anti-Baal collaboration between Elisha, Hazael and Jehu actually took place? If we are to take a final form approach to the text, we cannot permit ourselves to be satisfied with source-critical explanations, true though they may be. The text must be assumed to have a purpose in its existing form, in its existing place. Is the reader to understand that YHWH's plan failed because of Elijah's disobedience—or Hazael's? Are we to infer that it took place 'off stage'? Or are there subtle indicators within the wider text that help us to understand its purpose?

There is some recent historical evidence which may help to shed light on the issue. The Tel Dan Stele, apparently erected by Hazael, appears to attribute the slaying of Ahaziah and Joram, kings of Judah and Israel respectively,

to Hazael, unlike the biblical account in II Kings 9, which attributes these deaths to Jehu. William Schniedewind proposes that this may be because of a vassal-treaty between Jehu and Hazael, whereby Jehu's military exploits would be credited to his overlord (Schniedewind, 1996, p. 85).[34] This possible alliance between Hazael and Jehu helps to explain I Kings 19:15–17, in historical terms at least. Often seen as a disobeyed command or failed prophecy, because Elijah anointed none of the three, and Elisha killed no-one, its purpose may be historically explained by understanding that Elisha is directly implicated in the violent succession to the throne of both Hazael and Jehu. Thus all three appear to have been involved, directly or indirectly, in the deaths of Joram and Ahaziah and the accompanying anti-Baal purge, as implied by I Kings 19:17.

Even if this historical reconstruction is correct, however, it does not explain the *literary* purpose of I Kings 19:15–17 within the text, although it may modify the question. If it is true that Hazael assisted Jehu in his bloody crusade against Baalism, why does the text not tell us so? Why is the Command-Prophecy given to us but not a clear description of its fulfilment? Even if we conjecture that the information that Hazael was involved in the purge was not available to the redactor, we are little better off. Why then would the Command-Prophecy be included? This is a problem which has not been addressed by the scholarly literature. I will argue in chapter 6 that this Command-Prophecy formula serves an important textual function, opening an *inclusio* which is closed in II Kings 8 and 9, and heralding the emergence of the nation of Aram as a full player within the text.

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34 Schniedewind notes that at the time of Jehu's coup, his murder of Jezebel would have severed diplomatic links with Phoenicia (Jezebel was a Phoenician princess), resulting in the need for a new alliance. At the time of Jehu's anointing by Elisha's messenger, and subsequent coup, Jehu was a military officer engaged in battle with Hazael at Ramoth-Gilead; the kings of Israel and Judah having withdrawn from the front to Jezreel (II. 9:14–16). In order for Jehu to disengage and pursue the regicide, Schniedewind suggests that he would have needed to come to some arrangement with Hazael, probably amounting to the establishment of a vassal treaty.

He gives an example from contemporary Assyrian records to support the idea of a vassal's military exploits being attributed to his overlord, where Shalmaneser III claims conquests which are elsewhere attributed to his vassal Giammu (Schniedewind, 1996, p. 84). Such a vassal treaty might also explain the loss of territory in the north of Israel, as described in II. 10:32–33. Certainly there is biblical evidence that Aram and Israel had a treaty later on (II. 16:5; Isa. 7:1ff.).

Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with some preliminary considerations about the methodological approach to the text used in this investigation. In addition, it has recognised some enigmas, particularly within the Elijah/Elisha narratives and the Aram cycle, which have not been fully resolved by conventional hermeneutic techniques. These include ethical questions around the words and actions of the prophets, the role of Aram in the text, and the function of the Command-Prophecy formula in 1 Kings 19. In the following chapter I will be offering a hermeneutical approach which, as I will later show, sheds some light on these enigmas.

CHAPTER 3

Seriocomic Readings and the *Mise-en-abyme*: Useful Heuristics for Biblical Criticism?

> The laughter of the carnival is not simply parodic; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is *serious*.
>
> KRISTEVA, 1980, p. 80

∴

This chapter will describe two heuristic devices which may shed light on a particular form of humorous or satirical writing, namely reading for *seriocomic*[1] features, and detecting internal mirroring (mise-en-abyme) within a text. In the following chapter I will perform an investigation into the presence of the seriocomic genre within my text. It is the purpose of this chapter to describe the approach as established by Mikhail Bakhtin and his successors, to make a proposal concerning the presence of seriocomic features in Kings, and to establish some diagnostic and test criteria which may be applied to place limits around my investigation. I will also, at the end of this chapter, describe an unrelated literary device called the *mise-en-abyme*, which I shall be arguing in chapters 5 and 7 is a useful key to aid the understanding of our text.

Introduction to the Life and Work of Bakhtin

Although, as we shall see shortly, the seriocomic genre dates back at least to Classical Greece, it has in more recent times been thoroughly investigated and described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), and we will first consider the masterly contribution which he made to the field.

Bakhtin was a Russian scholar who defined himself as a philosophical anthropologist, but has been enormously influential in the fields of literary theory, folk culture, social theory and philosophy. Working as he did in Soviet Russia, he did not find it easy to publish his work; some writings may have been

1 The term is defined shortly.

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published pseudonymously,[2] and others saw a delay in publication amounting to decades. His work rose to prominence in the 1970s when authors such as Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov became interested in his writings (Clark & Holquist, 1984, pp. 3ff.).

Fundamentally, Bakhtin's interest is in *dialogue*, and he sees the points where worlds or texts clash as the place where meaning is determined. A brief summary of his very complex writings on dialogism will be outlined shortly.

His work on the novel is explored in his books *The Dialogic Imagination* and *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (first published in a shorter version as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*). Bakhtin sees Dostoevsky as the master of the novel, considering him the archetypal author of a truly polyphonic text (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 34). *Polyphony*[3] is the presence of multiple voices which dialogue within the text, none having privilege over the others. As part of his ideological commitment against *monologism* (a term used by Bakhtin to refer to the dominant unassailable voice of authority, whether the authority of oppressive government, or of the controlling author), Bakhtin understands the characters of such a novel to be *unfinalizable*; that is, they are full personalities, unable to be exhausted or fully defined, rather than two-dimensional agents which serve the author's device.

A linked but distinct part of Bakhtin's writings concern *heteroglossia* (*raznorečie*), the presence within a text of 'a plurality of independent unmerged voices and consciousnesses' (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 6). In contrast with the Formalists, who were concerned with the normative aspects of language, Bakhtin is attentive to the *centrifugal*[4] elements in language; that is, the places where linguistic customs are transgressed and norms are challenged. Thus, for Bakhtin, language is not the static medium of the hegemony, but contains different strata within it, such as dialects, professional language and so on. Heteroglossia is discussed further below.

In his doctoral dissertation, later published as *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin explores the medieval folk culture of carnival, and its permeation into literature, principally in the compositions of the sixteenth century writer

2 There is no scholarly consensus concerning the degree of authorial input which Bakhtin had into works published under the names of his friends V.N. Vološinov and P.N. Medvedev; however, it is generally agreed that his philosophy was the driving genius of the group.

3 Sometimes Bakhtin uses a Russian word to name his key term; at other times his choice of designation does not need translation. In his untranslated work, the term here (in transliteration) is 'polyphony'.

4 This refers to the idea of 'fleeing the centre', pursuing the deviant or irregular rather than privileging the normal.

François Rabelais. In the spectacle of carnival, 'a pageant without footlights' or actors (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 7), the monology of the authorities is challenged and subverted by the temporary inversions of the festival. Thus a mock king is crowned, the profane and scatological is elevated, and polar opposites are brought into juxtaposition (and hence dialogue). Bakhtin sees this festival, and its literary form *carnivalesque*, in semiotic terms,[5] where the subversive actions and polyphonic text signify dissent against the powers that be. Carnival, and its transition into literature, is the subject of further discussion below.

In recent years the work of Mikhail Bakhtin has been adopted as a lens for biblical interpretation, particularly of the Hebrew Bible.[6] It has been applied to post-exilic writings such as Daniel and Esther, to the book of Proverbs, and to the prophetic literature.[7] In particular, there has also been some work on a carnivalesque reading of some parts of the book of Kings.[8]

The aim of this investigation is to enquire into the possible relationship between the central section of Kings—as loosely defined in the previous chapter—and seriocomic literature,[9] using a Bakhtinian reading of the text. This chapter will examine the social construct of carnival, and the features of carnivalesque writing, as described by Bakhtin.

Bakhtin and the Dialogical Novel

Writing as he did in Russia during the early part of the twentieth century,[10] Bakhtin was attentive to the potential for language to be used as a controlling, centralising, unifying medium. In response to his Stalinist environment he became interested in the use of dialogue and polyphony, particularly in the written form. Bakhtin understands the true novel (as opposed to epic) to be composed dialogically, with the characters being given authority to behave and

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5 *Semiotics* is the science of signs and symbols; a *symbol* is a means of signifying something that is not related by cause or similarity, but by convention (Abrams, 1985, pp. 237–39).

6 The Deuteronomic trilogy by Robert Polzin (*Moses and the Deuteronomist* (1980), *Samuel and the Deuteronomist* (1989), *David and the Deuteronomist* (1993)) would be a good example.

7 Valeta, 2005; Craig, 1995; Hatton, 2008; Jemielity, 1992.

8 Lasine, 1993; García-Treto, 1990.

9 Bakhtin sees seriocomic literature to be a major subset of carnivalesque writing; this will be explored below.

10 As he lived in Soviet Russia, Bakhtin did not see the publication of most of his work until long after he wrote it, for political reasons. As a result, at least one of his works has been lost for ever. (It is said that, the publication proofs having been destroyed in a bombing raid of the Second World War, Bakhtin used the pages of his back-up copy to roll his cigarettes during the war (Holquist, 1986, p. xiii).)

speak freely, not manipulated by the author, but dialoguing with him. So in the Bakhtinian ideal of a novel, the author does not have a privileged voice: neither in his narratorial interjection nor through his manipulation of the other voices. Truth is tested at the clash of these voices. Thus he writes: 'The first and last sentences of an utterance are unique and have an additional quality. For they are, so to speak, sentences of the 'front line' that stand right at the boundary of the change of speech subjects' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89).

Most literary forms, according to Bakhtin, have failed to do justice to the dialogic nature of human expression. Thus he argues that poetry and drama have failed to break away from the monologism of the authorial voice. Indeed, many forms of what we might term 'novel' are solely monologic (Bakhtin uses Tolstoy as an example here). However, Bakhtin sees in some novelists, most particularly Dostoevsky, the possibility of true heteroglossia. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of Bakhtin's concept of the novel is its 'three-dimensionality', by which he means its plurality of language, discourse and voice (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 11).[11]

Bakhtin's definition of *novel*, then, is 'a representation [. . .] of human "languages" or "voices" that are not reduced into, or suppressed by, a single authoritarian voice: a representation of the inescapably dialogical quality of human life at its best' (Booth W., 1984, p. xxii).

Without wishing to pre-empt the forthcoming discussion on the transferability of this hermeneutic to the Bible, it perhaps can be noted at this stage that Bakhtin's interest in the novelistic form does not, of necessity, preclude the Hebrew Bible from its scrutiny. Bakhtin's decision to load the term 'novel' with his own particular freight bears resemblance here to Meir Sternberg, who argues in *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* that the ascription of a text as 'fiction' is not incompatible with the ideologically and theologically charged text of the Hebrew Bible. Texts are ascribed to the genre of historiography or fiction solely on the basis of their literary qualities. The presence within the biblical text of ideological priorities does not exclude it from analysis as a literary

11 Another important difference, but of less importance for the present enquiry, is in the novel's use of time. In Bakhtinian terms, the defining feature of the novel is the *chronotrope*, the particular spatio-temporal combination of the setting. For example, within classical literature, he identifies 'adventure time in the abstract setting,' 'adventure time of everyday life,' and 'biographical time' (Clark & Holquist, 1984, pp. 280ff.). He divides all prose literature fundamentally into 'epic' and 'novel'. Epics are not in chronological time; they are separated from the present, and are characterised by monological style. By contrast, in the Bakhtinian novel the spatio-temporal aspect fuses with the author's own (in the chronotrope of the novel, the space-time of the narrated events can be reached from the space-time of the author) (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 11, 382–83).

composition; the author has three distinct objectives: historiographic, ideological and aesthetic (Sternberg, 1985, p. 41).

At this stage it may be helpful to consider the question of where Bakhtinian thought lies in relation to one of the main philosophical and literary thrusts of the twentieth century, that of relativism.

Relativism by Another Name?

If Bakhtin opens our eyes to a multiplicity of ideologies within a text, is this simply another statement of relativism? Bakhtin himself refutes the accusation of relativism quite forcefully:

> We see no special need to point out that the polyphonic approach has nothing in common with relativism (or with dogmatism). But it should be noted that both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism). Polyphony as an artistic method lies in an entirely different plane. (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 69)

Mistaking Bakhtinian thought for relativism stems from a false assumption that polyphony precludes unity, and therefore implies lack of coherent meaning.

> Bakhtin rejected the Hobson's choices of modern thought: either there is a system or there is nothing; either there are comprehensive closed structures or there is chaos; either there is in principle an all-encompassing explanatory system or there is total relativism [...] The assumption that these are the only alternatives has blinded critics to the possibility of radically different kinds of truth, unity, and perspective. (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 233)

In contrast with those who suggest that meaning is indeterminate,[12] Bakhtin firmly locates meaning within the text. His distinctive contribution is to argue that, in a polyphonic text, meaning is not found where it is usually sought, that is, within the text's locutions. Rather, in Bakhtinian polyphony, meaning is located at the boundaries of these locutions, where the voices clash.

Roland Barthes has argued that such a concept amounts to the 'death of the author' and the loss of ultimate meaning:

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12 As argued, for example, by Stanley Fish in *Is there a Text in this Class?* (Harvard University Press, 1982).

> In a multiple writing, indeed, everything is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered; structure can be followed [. . .] but there is no underlying ground; the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated: writing ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it: it proceeds to a systematic exemption of meaning. (Barthes, 1967, p. 5)

Thus, for Barthes, the responsibility for interpretation lies squarely in the reader's purview. But Bakhtin's stance is somewhat different. For him, the author is a responsible, ethical agent, choosing not to impose his own voice, but, rather, artfully juxtaposing voices in order to generate dialogism and seek for truth.[13] Barbara Green enlarges on this Bakhtinian concept of authorship:

> Bakhtin's seeing skeins of relatedness and his insistence on human answerability and particularity are at cross-purposes with projects that reduce the author to a mere abstraction, the text to a pattern of devices, and the reader to simply a player of endless textual games. For Bakhtin, the position of the authors—all of them—structures the formal aspect of the work, the perpetual angles from which it will be constructed. The author is not equated with the person pushing the pen, but represents the confluence of time, space, and other factors at the particular time the writing occurs. (Green, 2000, p. 42)

Although Bakhtin's multiple layers of meaning in a text might seem to open us up to relativism, his careful tethering of a text to its context immediately puts boundaries around the number of interpretive possibilities it possesses.

While this discussion is necessarily brief, it has, I trust, established that while the present investigation may entertain the possibility of there being more ideological agendas within a text than the traditional understanding has allowed, the range of interpretive possibilities thus admitted is not boundless. Bakhtin's concept of polyphony and dialogism is an important element in his thinking, but more central for this investigation is his analysis of the absorption into the literary form of the social construct of carnival. This is the subject of the next section.

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13 The influential voice of the author is defended by Kevin Vanhoozer (1998, p. 234). 'Meaning, mediated by texts, is the communication activity of a genuine "other". There is meaning in this text because it is the product of communicative agency.'

Bakhtin and Carnival

Bakhtin sees three separate strands to the folk culture embraced by the term carnival. These are: the ritual spectacle; the comic verbal composition; and the adoption of non-standard forms of speech (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 5).

Bakhtin traces the folk tradition of carnival, which reached its heights in the middle ages, at least as far back as the Roman Saturnalia. He claims that the parodic ritualization of laughter and pageantry has been present in most societies since then. However, carnival reached its peak in the ritual pageant of folk humour, in which whole medieval towns engaged, sometimes for several months in the year (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 273). Medieval carnival was characterised by feasts, fairs, clowns, fools, jugglers, performing animals, and a pageantry of inversion. Thus: normally inviolable hierarchies were suspended or inverted; sacred ritual was mocked and parodied; the grotesque was celebrated; the normal prohibitions of the land were replaced by carnival law; and scatological humour was *de rigueur*. Central to the festival was the crowning (and later decrowning) of a carnival king, and the enthroning of boy bishops. Carnival is normal life inside-out, back-to-front and upside-down (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 81).

Bakhtin describes the phenomenon in the following excerpt from *Rabelais and his World*:

> As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.
>
> The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the mediaeval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination

> or abstract thought; they were experienced. The Utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.
>
> This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. A special carnivalesque, marketplace style of expression was formed. (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 10)

In this description Bakhtin's interest in heteroglossia is apparent; the centrifugal elements of carnival are seen to subvert and challenge the monological structures of officialdom. Obscenities, curses and billingsgate[14] replace normal verbal etiquette. The powers that be are mocked and parodied.

A key feature of carnival is the juxtaposition of opposites. The beggar becomes a king (and the king a beggar); fasting is replaced by feasting; the profane parodies the sacred. For Bakhtin, these points of polarity are places of rebirth; of new possibility. This is accentuated by the emphasis placed within the carnival upon bodily orifices, particularly the genitalia which combine the twin concepts of decay (excrement) and procreation (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 175).

Carnival laughter is directed not merely at the object of mockery, but also at those who laugh. Thus the carnival king is enthroned with both praise and abuse, but his coronation is followed by a dethronement which may be accompanied by a mock execution or a genuine thrashing (Bakhtin, 1984b, pp. 197ff.). Unlike the modern satirist, says Bakhtin, the one who laughs does not distance himself from the object of his laughter. 'The people's ambivalent laughter [...] expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it' (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 12). Thus the essence of carnival is not mere reversal (high is replaced by low, official by unofficial), but is a *joyful freedom*; a creative open-endedness (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 124).

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin sets out the main features of carnival[15] (Bakhtin, 1984a, pp. 122–124), which I summarise below.

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14 Bakhtin uses this term to refer to 'curses, oaths, and popular blazons' (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 5).

15 Sometimes, as here, Bakhtin does not provide a clear distinction as to whether he is speaking of *carnival* or *carnivalised literature.* In any case, as he is arguing that the features of the former inform the creation of the literary genre, it is largely an academic point.

1. It is 'syncretic pageantry': a complex and varied phenomenon that appropriates official forms of communication for diverse, even contradictory, polemics.
2. Social barriers are suspended and there is free and familiar contact between normally separated individuals. This gives rise to a new mode of inter-relationships, stripped of the normal obstacles imposed by authority and officialdom.
3. Linked with this is a juxtaposition of opposites: the sacred with the profane; the lofty with the low; the wise with the foolish. Bakhtin terms this *mésalliance*.
4. There is profanation, blasphemy against the sacred and debasement of civil power, alongside an elevation of the base, profane and obscene.
5. The central act of the carnival is the enthronement and subsequent dethronement of the carnival king. The promised decrowning, even at the point of crowning, offers an ambivalence to the symbolism.

How revolutionary is the social construct of carnival? Bakhtin understands it as being about newness, 'pregnant death' (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 126). However, it is not about the establishment of a new, inverted, monologism. Thus it is as likely to subvert as invert, critiquing from within the established social order (Stallybrass, 1985, pp. 114ff.). Similarly, biblical scholar Stuart Lasine has suggested that carnival can have a neutral effect on the status quo in one of two ways. First, rather than inverting hierarchy, carnival may merely suspend it for the duration of the festival. Secondly, by allowing a safe vent for the expression of subversive feelings, it may in fact serve as a means of preserving the official order, rather than allowing those feelings to foment into something more destructive (Lasine, 1993, p. 50). Thus after the carnival was over, the suspension of licence ended, and life returned to its former ordered state. Bakhtin himself takes pains to assert that carnival is not about replacing one hegemony with another, but about the establishment of a 'joyful relativity' (Bakhtin, 1984a, pp. 122–4). What is the function of this ritualised form of laughter?

> Laughter purifies from dogmaticism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 123)

Thus carnival permits the reappraisal and challenge of the official forms of society. Bakhtin considers that within the social context of medieval carnival

it serves to interrogate the world for truth; some forms of truth are inaccessible to serious enquiry and can only be derived by means of laughter (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 66). It does not deny sincerity but complements it. To repeat the quotation that I used at the top of this chapter: 'The laughter of the carnival is not simply parodic; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is serious' (Kristeva, 1980, p. 80). This observation concurs with the comments made in chapter 1, where I argued that humour does not, in itself, equate to levity. This will be significant as we consider the issue of whether carnivalesque features could be found in the Hebrew Bible, and we will return to this question shortly.

As we have seen, Bakhtin is not unique in his exploration of the social construct of carnival; it has been examined by a number of scholars, such as George Santayana and Peter Stallybrass. Bakhtin's particular contribution was the investigation into the bleeding of carnivalesque thought and behaviour into the literary text. This is the subject of the next section.

From Social Construct to Literary Device

In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin investigates the link between the social institution of carnival and a type of literature which he terms *carnivalesque* or *grotesque realism*. This is a genre of writing which he understands to have existed since classical times, but which reached its pinnacle, like carnival itself, in the sixteenth century, with the physician-monk François Rabelais, author of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. The writings of Rabelais are characterised by the fantastic, the grotesque and the bawdy. There is a particular attention to what Bakhtin terms the 'lower bodily strata', with genitalia and excrement and intestines in prominence. Rabelais's characters are monstrous; senile, deformed or deranged. There are curses, profanities, obscenities and neologisms formed from strings of words. Rabelais is, like other Renaissance writers, seeking a means of expressing an emerging sense of freedom and experimentation in thought and speech.

It will be readily seen that this literature bears much resemblance to the social form of carnival. Both turn certainty into ambiguity; both juxtapose polar opposites such as the sacred and profane, the lofty and the low; both celebrate the unofficial, the profane and the grotesque.

Just as there is an official structure to society, which the carnival parodies and subverts, so there may be an official form of language or rhetoric which is the language of the monologue. Bakhtin celebrates the carnivalesque form of literature which is parodic and ambivalent, a linguistic *transgression*[16] which challenges the monologue of the *status quo*.

16 The concept of *transgression* of linguistic and social codes owes more to Julia Kristeva who further developed Bakhtin's thought. See Kristeva, 1980, p. 71.

Carnivalesque literature is semiotically complex; the recognised symbols of authority are challenged and undermined, but abuse is universal rather than personal. As with carnival itself, the heteroglossia does not bisect society but is ambivalent, rich and open-ended. Praise is ironical and abuse can be affectionate.

As the form moves from the social construct into the literary text, it may undergo a lessening of the humorous effect, retaining, however, the ambivalence and heteroglossic satire which is the hallmark of this type of literature. Bakhtin (1984a, pp. 164ff.) terms this 'reduced laughter' and maintains that although the echoes of humour may be muffled, they are nonetheless audible in every form of this genre. Thus, for example, he finds reduced laughter in Dostoevesky's *Crime and Punishment* and in Plato's Socratic Dialogues.

This is of course consistent with the idea explored in chapter 1, where I argued that humour may carry a serious purpose, and indeed that it may reveal certain aspects of truth which the serious genres cannot convey. For these reasons, Bakhtin's concept of reduced laughter is an important concept to which we will return.

Having established in *Rabelais and his World* the existence of a carnivalesque literary form, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* he describes a class of literature embraced by the term, which he terms σπουδογέλοιος, or *seriocomical*, a term which he traces back to Classical Greek literature.[17] Unlike its converse, the serious genres (such as the epic, the tragedy, and classical rhetoric), seriocomical literature is dialogical in nature, probing its subject by means of satire, humour or irony.

The three characteristics of seriocomical writing, according to Bakhtin, are: first, a lack of epic or tragic distance from the subject; secondly, an eschewing of legend in favour of experience and free invention; thirdly, the use of inserted genres within the text[18] (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 108).

Bakhtin identifies two distinct forms of seriocomical literature: Socratic dialogue, and its successor, the Menippean satire, which he collectively terms the *Menippea* (Bakhtin, 1984a, pp. 106ff.). It is the Menippea which may prove fruitful as a lens for the reading of parts of the Hebrew Bible, and this is the subject of the next section.

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17 The classicist Thomas Schmitz takes issue with Bakhtin here, stating that ancient use of the term σπουδογέλοιος is less delineated than Bakhtin supposes. He concedes, however, that Bakhtin's broader point with regard to what he terms the Menippea remains valid (Schmitz, 2002, p. 73).

18 That is, heteroglossia.

Menippean Satire

Menippean satire takes its name from Menippus of Gadara, who lived in Thebes in the third century BCE, but only fragments of his work survive. The genre which bears his name arose two centuries later with the writings of Varro who consciously styled himself on his progenitor. However, Bakhtin believes that the features of Menippean comedy can be traced back beyond Menippus himself to Antisthenes, writing in the late fourth and early third centuries (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 112).

Menippus was a Cynic. Excluded from the intellectual elite of Thebes because of his status as a foreigner and slave, he responded by parodying the established forms of philosophical discourse (symposium, dialogue, epistle and so on); exaggerating their arguments and pushing their logic to absurdity. His means of achieving this were by use of songs, lambasts and poems inserted into his text (Kirk, 1980, p. xiv).

Bakhtin sees the genre of Menippean satire as one of the main carriers of carnivalesque literature throughout all the centuries that followed, with a 'deep internal integrity,' despite an enormous ability to penetrate into a wide variety of lesser genres. He identifies fourteen features found in the genre (Bakhtin, 1984a, pp. 114ff.):

1. A variable, but generally overt, comic element.
2. Liberation from history and memoir on the one hand, and from legend on the other. Rather, it is characterised by the fantastic and by freedom of invention.
3. A commitment to exploring a philosophical idea, to seeking for and testing truth.
4. 'Slum naturalism'; that is, a setting within common and even ignoble locations, such as roads, brothels or taverns.
5. Attention to ultimate questions; often by use of the *syncrisis*[19] of ultimate positions.
6. A three-planed setting: heavens, earth and underworld.[20]
7. 'Experimental fantasticality'; the action is often observed from an unusual vantage point, such as on high.
8. Examination of abnormal psychic states, such as insanity, passions, suicide.

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19 Syncrisis is the technique used within Socratic dialogue of juxtaposing alternate points of view.

20 The exact nature of the heavens and the underworld would be controlled by the religious context of the writing.

9. Scandal scenes: inappropriate behaviour, violations of accepted etiquette.
10. Oxymoronic combinations such as the virtuous courtesan, the gentleman brigand; and sharp contrasts such as rises and falls, abrupt transitions, mésalliances.
11. A utopian element.
12. The wide use of inserted genres, such as letters, poems, speeches.
13. As a result of the inserted genres, a multi-styled, multi-toned approach.
14. A concern with current issues; for example, with allusion to individuals within the collective consciousness.

A related, perhaps simpler, taxonomy is offered by Eugene Kirk in his book *Menippean Satire* (Kirk, 1980), which attempts to catalogue every instance of the genre written in the languages of Western Europe before 1660. Kirk (1980, p. xi) suggests that works within the genre share certain 'family resemblances' within five areas. The *style* is characterised by unconventional diction, new words, vulgarity and mixed languages. The *structure* is a medley of various genres. The *topic* is outlandish fiction. The *theme* is a pursuit of learning or truth. Finally, the *audience* is less learned than the writer, but committed to the pursuit of truth. It will be seen that the first four points correlate closely to Bakhtin's own, but the introduction of the intended audience as a relevant factor is a new concept.

However, Kirk shrewdly points out that the identification of a particular genre is a trivial pursuit, unless it sheds light on the reason that the form was selected by the author, and why it was considered to be the appropriate choice for the task in hand. He suggests that the Menippean genre was often selected by ancient authors because it was attractive to a less-informed readership, and because of its possibilities in terms of breadth of subject and flexibility (Kirk, 1980, p. xiii). I will argue below that the use of carnival in society and seriocomic literature are probably universal human expressions in the face of power structures unassailable by conventional means.

An important feature of seriocomic writing is the presence of the 'Fool' or 'Clown', which for Bakhtin is wrapped up in the concept of 'masking'.

Masking and Bakhtin

Within the 'low' genres of medieval literature; folklore and semi-folklore; which tend towards parody and satire, Bakhtin identifies the characteristic roles of the Fool and Clown.[21] Of course he is not the first to identify these

21 In most of his thought, Bakhtin does not draw a clear distinction between the role of Fool and Clown.

figures in both society and literature.[22] However, Bakhtin understands their role in the seriocomic form as 'maskers'; their function is purely metaphorical, existing not in their own right but in order to offer an indirect reflection on the other(s). They therefore bear 'the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 159). For the author, the Fool and Clown provide a specific device by which to reflect upon private life and make it public; a device through which the author can solve the dilemma of where to stand in relation to the life he portrays.

> In the struggle against conventions [...] these masks take on an extraordinary significance. They grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolise life; the right to parody others while talking, the right not to be taken literally, not 'to be oneself' [...] the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 163)

Thus for Bakhtin the mask is a device of anonymity, of impunity, a means of parody; it is an instrument of change, of transformation. It may, but need not, be associated with deceit or secret keeping (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 40).

Bakhtin identifies a third important feature of comic writing of this sort, heteroglossia, and we will now turn to consider this.

The Novel, Common Speech and Heteroglossia

Bakhtin's work on modern texts (such as the works of Dickens) leads him to an analysis of the use of heteroglossia in the comic novel which I will argue has some bearing on the ancient texts in our purview. His thinking is set out most systematically in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 301ff.).

The Bakhtinian *novel* contains a number of strata of language (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 301ff.). There may be occasional authorial interjections, but the main style will be written in 'common language', consistent with the linguistic norms of the social group, which represents the common point of view. Layered within this common language will be found parodic stylizations of other language styles: the more exalted language of court, business language, epic style and so on. The author will oscillate between these forms, continually shifting between support for and critique of these forms. These shifts may be gradual or abrupt;

22 We might consider, for instance, the role of the Fool in *King Lear*. It is, perhaps, of significance that he is unnamed.

the language forms may be formally delineated from one another (for example, by speech markers) or only implicitly separated. The 'to and fro' of the author throws a continually shifting light onto the variant language styles. At times there may be apparent complicity with a speaker, at other times there is an ironic distance from him.

Bakhtin considers such heteroglossia to be essential for the development of comic style:

> Thus the stratification of literary language, its speech diversity, is an indispensible prerequisite for comic style, whose elements are projected onto different linguistic planes while at the same time the intention of the author, refracted as it passes through these planes, does not wholly give itself up to any of them. It is as if the author has no language of his own, but does possess his own style, his own organic and unitary law governing the way he plays with languages and the way his own real semantic and expressive intentions are refracted within them. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 311)

Bakhtin considers Fielding, Thackeray and Dickens to be classic exemplars in English of heteroglossic novelists. Can such modern writings as those by Dickens and Dosteovsky have any value in the hermeneutic of ancient Hebrew texts? We will now consider the question of whether the Bakhtinian lens can have any applicability in the reading of the Hebrew Bible.

Transferability to the Bible?

Mikhail Bakhtin would have been surprised at the application of his ideas to the reading of the Bible, considering it to be unsuitable for such literary techniques. Although he makes little reference to sacred texts in his writings, he does refer to the dialogic nature of the book of Job in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 280). However, he considers the dialogue between Job and God to be 'internally endless', for hostility between man and God is 'irrevocable and eternal'. In other words, as Thomas Jemielity puts it, ' "Thus says the LORD" hardly introduces a mere exchange of views' (Jemielity, 1992, p. 63).[23]

23 A contrary view is argued by Francisco García-Treto in his 1998 paper, 'Crossing the Line: Three scenes of divine-human engagement in the Hebrew Bible'. García-Treto identifies three pericopes where YHWH appears to enter into genuine dialogue with a human interlocutor: Cain (Gen 4:9–16), Abraham (Gen 18:22–23) and Ezekiel (Ezek 4:9–15).

From this unpromising beginning, then, we turn to the question of whether the work of Bakhtin might be able to enlighten our reading of the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

Barbara Green has argued strongly for its applicability (Green, 2005). First, she considers that his particular insight concerning the dialogic nature of communication makes his work highly relevant to the biblical scholar. We will consider this shortly. Secondly, Bakhtin's commitment to viewing literature as a social phenomenon comes, she argues, as a welcome relief from the historical-literary divide in recent scholarship. Thirdly, provoked perhaps by his uncomfortable position with regard to Soviet Russia, Bakhtin encourages *answerability*. Every interaction is between self and other; and every statement is modifiable by the response of the other. Bakhtin writes: 'Every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280). Green considers that this lends itself particularly well to the reading of an ethical text such as the Bible (Green, 2005, p. 243). She concludes, elsewhere, 'Biblical text [. . .] is vastly illuminated by Bakhtin's ideas' (Green, 2000, p. 186; see also pp. 60–61).

So much for the broader ideological underpinnings of Bakhtin's work. But are his critical techniques applicable? There are two, related questions which need to be addressed in this regard. First, is it possible that there may be genuine polyphony in the Hebrew Bible; and secondly, how plausible is it that there may be seriocomic writing in these texts? We will address these in turn.

Polyphony and the Hebrew Bible

Since the pioneering work of Julius Wellhausen (1882), it has been clear that much of the Hebrew Bible is composed from multiple sources, sources which bear their own theological and ideological priorities. How then should we seek to read such texts? There are a number of possibilities. One is to try to separate the strands and read each of them individually without allowing any dialogue between them. This is the approach of the source critic. Another is to attempt to unify the diverse ideologies into an amalgamated reading without attention to their distinctiveness. This may lead to a naïve reading. A third is to hold the various strands in unmerged tension, recognising their diversity. This approach has gained currency in the last few decades.

For example, Meir Sternberg argues against the presence of didacticism within the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible, suggesting sardonically that 'if biblical narrative is didactic, then it has chosen the strangest way to go about its business', adding 'the Bible habitually generates ambivalence' (Sternberg, 1985, pp. 37–38). Likewise, Rex Mason, pointing out two, apparently conflicting,

strands in the Deuteronomic writings,[24] argues that this represents a 'sophisticated, dialectical structure within the work as a whole' (Mason, 1997, p. 84). This is not quite equivalent to a Bakhtinian reading, seeing two sides of debate rather than a multiplicity of voices, but it is a step towards such a reading.

If scholars such as Sternberg and Mason come close to articulating the polyphonic nature of scripture without recourse to the work of Bakhtin, what does he have to add? The strength of a Bakhtinian reading is not to try to synthesise these, or even to try to systematise each source in its own right, but rather, to hold the text as a unified entity comprising unmerged polyphony; a *dialogic event*. 'The truth about human nature, the world, and God *cannot* be uttered by a single voice but only by a community of unmerged voices' (Newsom, 1996, p. 301).

However, though the presence of these multiple voices and contrasting polemics within the text opens up possibilities of pre-Bakhtinian polyphony, we must concede that Bakhtin does not generally use a multi-authored text in his analysis; the polyphony he identifies usually derives from the inserted genres positioned by the author.[25]

So is it permissible to infer polyphony in a text which has developed over a prolonged period of time? Or, to put this question another way, is it possible to identify subversion within a text where the ideological milieu has swung through polar extremes during the period of composition, and whose polyphony has consequently been established in layers? Or are we to conclude that such counter-traditions are merely artefacts of the compositional process, with no larger function within the discourse? Our answer to this question will depend upon our receptivity to the insights of diachronic analysis, our sensitivity to polyphony, and our respect for the craft of the author.

As discussed in the previous chapter, diachronic approaches to the text can be of value in aiding our understanding of its contextual world and formation process. A 'double reading' of the text has been advocated by Walter Brueggemann, who suggests that while the Hebrew Bible should be read primarily in the context of exile, the original resonances should be permitted to play beneath the rhetoric of the exilic situation. Thus the *Sitze im Leben* of the original writers should be considered as well as that of the final redactor (Brueggemann, 1997, pp. 74ff.). A similar approach is proposed by Robert Polzin, who describes the interplay between literary and historical analysis as

24 That is, the nationalist propaganda of Israel and the critique of kingship.

25 It should be stated that the Bakhtinian author is not simplistically the hand which wrote the text, but a player within the text, who dialogues with the other characters, and whose voice is heard refracted through the voices of others (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 311).

a circular reading, beginning with literary analysis. From this basis, historical problems are examined, and from here the literary conclusions may be refined (Polzin, 1980, p. 6). In this way, as we reach towards an understanding of the purpose and *Sitz im Leben* of the author, we should also attempt to draw some conclusions about the readers for whom the text was intended.[26] While we necessarily approach this ancient text as modern readers (cf. Bergen,W.; 1999, p. 39), it will inform our understanding of the text, and in particular of the intention of the author, if we are attentive to the conversation which he is having with his intended reader.[27]

Thus diachronic scholarship tells us that these conversations are taking place at a number of levels and directs our attention to the various *Sitze im Leben*, as best we can deduce them. Attentiveness to polyphony in the text will not flatten these voices into an exilic dialogue, but will seek to hear them all. Understanding the text as a coherent piece of art will lead us to expect to find meaning at these voices clash.

Peter Hatton has used the relatively modern example of *Sir Thomas More*, a sixteenth century English play with multiple levels of authorship, to demonstrate the possibility of a multi-authored work whose final form demonstrates coherence. He argues that 'the notion of one author being totally responsible for giving a text its unity is a relatively modern assumption' (Hatton, 2008, p. 49). Indeed he is drawing here explicitly on the work of Robert Alter, who has described biblical multi-authored texts as demonstrating a 'surprising degree of artful coherence' (Alter, 1992, p. 4).

It is important not to confuse coherence with monologism. The work of an editor with a strong ideological agenda may suppress or co-opt the centripetal voices within the text to a monology, but alternatively his voice and editing decisions may provide a diversity of voices within the text. This possibility is well described by Yairah Amit in *Hidden Polemics in Biblical Narrative*. For example, with regard to the multiple versions of Goliath's demise in Samuel, she has written:

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26 Of course, the notion of authorial intention has been called into question by post-structuralist literary theorists. Nonetheless, I here work with the empirical assumption that the text had an author, who had an intention, towards which I may reach, albeit imperfectly. This is discussed at greater length in chapter 8.

27 This is not reader-response criticism in its more developed form, but rather, a conservative reading as described by Kevin Vanhoozer, '[Conservative reader-response critics] confined their attention to the implied reader, that is, to the reader in the text. Textual meaning is encoded, but it exists in a state of suspended animation until it is read. Reading awakens, as it were, the sleeping message.' (Vanhoozer, 1998, p. 151)

> The contemporary attitude of superiority, according to which the ancient editors did not understand that which is seen and understood as obvious by the average modern reader—does not make sense to me [...] It therefore seems to me that another possibility is plausible, namely that the preservation of the tradition in the appendix is testimony to the editor's intense will to leave future generations clear signs. (Amit, 2000, p. 35)

These 'clear signs' may oppose the surface reading of trajectory of the sources being used:

> The Chronicler's interpretation [...] helped to cultivate the idealization of David. He uproots every weed liable to harm the glory of David, contributing to the creation of a supportive position in the polemic concerning the royal house. By contrast, the editing of Samuel preserves a tendentious line that does not refrain from criticizing David and is interested in creating a polemic framework. (Amit, 2000, p. 36)[28]

The role of the final redactor is critical, then, but not heavy-handed. He can be (at least partly) aware of the shades of meaning in the sources he incorporates, but he resists the temptation to smooth them out. Amit has written of the redactor's sensitivity to the strands within their text.

> One may definitively state that there would be fewer polemics if a systematic act of editing were to have deleted rejected positions, leaving only a uniform 'official' position. The question that must be asked is therefore: what motivated redactors throughout the generations to allow the existence of polemics? [...] In many cases the editors were conscious of their own act of editing. Precisely because they were sensitive to the complexity of reality, to its multi-facetness [sic], and to its changeable nature, they were interested in presenting a variety of opinions, to challenge positions that had taken root, and to allow the presence of polemics. (Amit, 2000, pp. 32–33)

Therefore, provided we can posit the existence of a final single hand[29] of intentional but not omniscient redaction, it may be possible to identify polyphony

28 It should be noted that this idealised depiction of the Davidic monarchy is by no means the universal consensus of Chronicles scholars. See, for example, Jeon, 2013.

29 This does not exclude the possibility that the 'final redactor' was an ideologically consistent scribal school. See, for example, Van der Toorn, 2007, pp. 110–41. The biblical 'literary'

within a multi-authored text. However, this does not necessarily imply that all polyphony in such a text need originate from the different sources. It is possible that an author may, in more conventional Bakhtinian style, introduce different 'voices' on his own initiative. Conversely, this is not to be read as a proof that all multi-authored texts are necessarily polyphonic. I argued above that it is quite possible for a redactor to create a monologic text by the controlling use of sources or voices, in the same way that Bakhtin considers Tolstoy to be monologic but Dostoevsky polyphonic.

Carnival and the Hebrew Bible

Second, then, is the question of whether we might reasonably expect to find seriocomic literature in the Hebrew Bible. As we have seen, Bakhtin himself traced the genre back as far as the fourth century BCE in the Greek tradition. I am postulating that it may also be found in Hebrew writings originating prior to this. Is it feasible that the seriocomic form might have occurred spontaneously in these two very different milieux?

Although Bakhtin confined his argument and examples to the cultures influenced by Christendom and the Graeco-Roman world,[30] his description of a society divided into a ruling elite and a 'peasant class' would be applicable to cultures with a much greater diversity than this, both historically and geographically. The phenomenon of carnival which he observes and describes,

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critic Jerome Walsh considers that it is helpful in this endeavour to separate the implied author from any particular individual within the compositional history of the text.

> 'To put it in literary terms, [narrative criticism] posits an "implied author," a single and singular creative wellspring for the entire text. It does not claim (or deny) that the source of unity exists, or ever existed, in the real world; it simply takes as a starting point that the text can be read as unified whole with coherent meaning and that, therefore, for this to be possible we must be able to speak—at least metaphorically—of an "author." From a literary perspective this means that the "implied author" exists outside the narrative world he created, but inside the text that evidences his existence.' (Walsh, 2006, p. 118, emphasis original).This is in contrast to Bakhtin's approach to the author, who views him as a confluence of space and time (see Green, 2000, p. 42) but having a voice *within* the narrative (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 311). Walsh is, of course, not original in this distinction between implied author and actual writer. Wayne Booth's original distinction (Booth, 1983, pp. 67ff.; 155ff.) was tripartite: actual writer, implied author, and narrator, but Sternberg writes that in biblical narratives the roles of narrator and implied author become effectively identical (Sternberg, 1985, p. 75). However Walsh's use of the distinction to address the problem we are investigating is helpful.

30 See, for instance, his survey of the history of laughter in Bakhtin, 1984b, pp. 59–144.

then, might reasonably be expected to be more prevalent than his own ground-breaking but limited study demonstrates.

This is borne out by the work of James Scott, *inter alia*. Scott has examined the use of speech-acts and practices of resistance, which he terms 'hidden transcripts'. A hidden transcript is the 'discourse that takes place "off-stage," beyond direct observation by powerholders,' (Scott, 1990). This phenomenon is neatly summarised by the Ethiopian proverb which he quotes:

> When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts, (Scott, 1990, title page).

Scott argues, by use of many examples from diverse societies and narratives, that this silent insolence is a widespread phenomenon, showing a trans-cultural 'family resemblance'.

> Similar structures of domination [...] tend to provoke responses and forms of resistance that also bear a family resemblance to one another. (Scott, 1990, p. 21)

So, by extension, we might expect the social phenomenon of carnival to be similarly prevalent. Indeed, it is readily found in South American, North American, European and African societies, but these could arguably be traced back through colonial expansion to a single point of origin, perhaps Greek.[31] However, Carnival has also, more recently, been identified in Far-Eastern cultures such as China and Korea, which are much less likely to have arisen from the same source. For example, there is evidence for a carnival-like festival in Korea in the seventeenth century (CE), where villagers paraded into the normally sacrosanct precincts of the *shogun*, and masqueraded as their social betters (Toby, 1986, pp. 445ff.). Carnivalesque disruptive urban festivities have been described in nineteenth century Shanghai (Yue, 2006, pp. 65–105).

It is possible, then, that Carnival is much less a learned or transmitted phenomenon than a recurring response to a common human condition.

Indeed, Johan Huizinga (1970) has argued something similar in his renowned treatise on play *Homo Ludens*. Play, he says—and Huizinga's understanding of play incorporates both ritual and festival—is not so much a phenomenon which occurs in every culture, as it is one which precedes and shapes culture.

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31 The phenomenon of carnival in post-colonial nations has been explored with regard to Latin America by Thomas Abercrombie, and Angola by David Birmingham (Abercrombie, 2003; Birmingham, 2006, pp. 123–38).

With cultural 'progress', the play element becomes largely confined to the sacred sphere, but at any moment it may re-erupt (Huizinga, 1970, pp. 66–67).

If my proposal is correct, we might expect to find evidence of carnival-like festivals in the Ancient Near East. The traditional method of celebrating Purim is classically associated with rumbustious revelry, with the instruction in the Talmud: 'A man is obligated to drink on Purim until he no longer knows [the difference] between cursed Haman and blessed Mordecai' (Neusner, 2011, p. 7b). However, in fact, the Purim celebration was traditionally a mixture of gravity and celebration, of both feasting and fasting at once (Soloveitchik, 2007, p. 4), a very typically carnivalistic phenomenon.[32]

A second ancient Near-Eastern example may be found in Babylon. The New Moon Festival, held during the month of Nisan, shows carnival elements of decrowning, abuse, and inversion of power. During this festival the king was deprived of his ceremonial dress and slapped in the face by the high priest, who would then drag the king by the ear into the presence of Marduk (Bel) and demand that he make a declaration of his innocence before the god. At the end of the festivities, the king's regalia was returned to him, again with a slap to the face which had to be severe enough to elicit tears. Indeed, it was the flow of the king's tears which verified that the god was favourable (Lambert, 1998).

If carnivalesque rituals are an almost universal human expression, we might anticipate that the seriocomic form of literature could likewise be expected within a more diverse range of texts than Bakthin himself identified. It, too, may be a universal human expression. Indeed, there is evidence to support this theory. To provide an example from non-Western literature, the *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* is an anonymous Chinese novel portraying life in the seventeenth century. Daria Berg, a scholar in Chinese literature, says it 'delves into a survey of depravity with voyeuristic glee', exploring 'a topsy-turvy world of inverted norms and values, dramatizing the breakdown of Confucian morals and manners', using 'burlesque and grotesque images and with heavy use of irony' (Berg, 2002, p. 1).

Clearly the thorough testing of this theory would be a venture outside the scope of the current work, but it provides, I would argue, a plausible explanation for the presence of the seriocomic form within an ancient Hebrew text. Indeed, if carnivalesque literature is a universal human expression, that is, a recurrent genre which emerges spontaneously in all (or most) cultures, then we would be surprised *not* to find it in the Hebrew Bible, given the diversity of genres, expressions and sources which that book contains. In fact, despite his

32 The carnivalesque conduct and background of Purim has been described by Kenneth Craig (1995), and will be discussed further below.

stated reticence to apply his work to the Bible, Bakhtin appears to have paved the way for it:

> In the world culture of the past there is more laughter than our ears can catch. (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 135)
>
> All the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of the laughing people. (p. 474)

If Bakhtin is right, the danger is not that we will read too much seriocomedy into these ancient texts, but that we will discover too little.

Biblical Scholarship and Bakhtin

In recent years, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin has been used by some biblical scholars, particularly those interested in taking a synchronic view of the text. Much of the work has been concerned with his theories of heteroglossia, polyphony and dialogue.[33] However, while dialogic readings of the Hebrew Bible are beginning to gain currency, considerably less work has been done on the contribution which Bakhtin's work in the area of seriocomic literature might make to biblical studies. This aspect of Bakhtin's thought, distinct in many ways, cannot be regarded as entirely independent of his work on dialogue, since both relate to his suspicion of the use of language to monologise and to exercise controlling power. Indeed, Bakhtin's fourteen features of Menippean satire include the features of syncrisis (the apposition of contrasting viewpoints), and of multiple genres and styles within a text. However, it contains certain very distinct features, not least of which is the comic (or reduced laughter) element. We will now briefly consider the work of certain scholars who have considered the seriocomic paradigm in relation to narrative in the Hebrew Bible.

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33 The interested reader is referred to the following works: Polzin, 1980; Polzin, 1989; Polzin, 1993; Bergen D., 1999; Green, 2000; García-Treto, 1996; McCracken, 1993; Pardes, 1992; Fentress-Williams, 2007; Hatton, 2008; Claassens, 2003. With particular regard to dialogism in the book of Kings, the work of Iain Provan (Provan, 1997) is of interest. He examines the apparent inconsistency within II Kings 17:24–41, and suggests that this is not inconsistency but dialogue, provided one posits the existence of irony within the passage. Whether this constitutes polyphony within the terms which we have described is unclear, however. Bakhtinian polyphony allows no single voice the privilege of having the final word, or of controlling the interpretation (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 6); each is equally valid. By contrast, Provan's suggestion is still clearly monologic, in Bakhtinian terms.

Seriocomic Writing within Biblical Narrative

Only a handful of scholars have applied Bakhtin's notion of seriocomic literature to Biblical narratives. Within the book of Kings, the contributions of Francisco García-Treto, Hugh Pyper and Stuart Lasine have been significant, and these will be addressed in more detail later. Outside the book of Kings, the work of Kenneth Craig on Esther, David Valeta on Daniel 1–6, and Nehama Aschkenasy on Ruth deserves further attention. Of particular interest are three questions: on what grounds did the author justify his or her use of the Bakhtinian method; how is the method applied; and what fresh light does such a reading offer?

Kenneth Craig on Esther

In *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*, published in 1995, Kenneth Craig seeks to show the book of Esther as a carnivalistic text.[34] He offers surprisingly little defence of this approach at the outset: a brief comment that indirect discourse, a key feature of Bakhtin's novel form, is found within the biblical text of Esther, and a reminder to the reader that Bakhtin himself described novelistic discourse as an ancient phenomenon. Essentially, however, Craig is unashamedly pragmatic in his appropriation of the Bakhtinian method for the study of the book.

> My concern is not so much to praise Bakhtin as to make worthwhile use of certain aspects of his work that seem particularly illuminating for the ancient story [. . .] My purpose is to ask *in what way* is the story of Esther linked to the novel—the novel, that is, as Bakhtin understood it—and to ask if the biblical story is an example of the literary carnivalesque. (Craig, 1995, p. 24, emphasis original)

Craig considers Esther to be a unique book within the Hebrew Bible as he considers that it has arisen from folk literature (Craig, 1995, p. 44).[35] However in response to the critical attitudes of others towards the book, which has drawn much censure for its ethics, he applies his carnivalesque reading as a step towards its rehabilitation within the canon.

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34 We have, perhaps, somewhat pre-empted this discussion by noting above that the celebration of Purim, centred on the Esther story, contains features which are carnivalesque in character.

35 This is not uncontroversial: for example there is evidence that parts of the book of Kings are folk tales. E.g. Rofé, 1970, LaBarbera, 1984, p. 651.

Craig sees in the feast of Purim, and its precursor events, a ritualised mockery, a culture of the unofficial, which challenges the hegemony of Ahasuerus. Noting the carnival theme of food and drink, Craig considers the role of feasting and drinking to be central to the narrative, and in particular intended to call our attention to their association with reversal of power. The first banquets are a celebration of imperial might; the narrative then moves us—via Esther's pivotal banquets—to the celebratory feasting of the delivered Jews.

Further reversals within the narrative enhance this effect. Thus the honours Haman seeks for himself are heaped on Mordecai. Haman is hanged on his own gallows, while his enemy Mordecai occupies his former position. Vashti is deposed out of fear that women will govern men; but Esther grows in power and influence throughout the book. The day designated for the destruction of the Jews is given over for their ascendency over their enemies. Craig points out these and a number of other, smaller reversals.

An important feature of Rabelais's work involves the crowning and decrowning of the carnival king; Craig demonstrates the centrality of this theme to the book. Vashti is commanded to come before the king wearing her royal crown (1:11); after her dethronement, it is given to Esther (2:17). The crown that Haman seeks for himself (6:8) is implicitly given to Mordecai when he is honoured; after Haman's death Mordecai is explicitly awarded a 'great golden crown' (8:15).

In sum, Craig makes a plausible case for reading the book of Esther as a social document closely allied with the seriocomic genre of writing. At times his argument seems a little forced,[36] but in many places his observations are startling and credible. In particular it provides a believable explanation for the difficulties which the text places before us in terms of ethics and apparent literary dissonance.

As noted above, Craig's approach to the methodology is pragmatic, asking in what way the text might be linked to the seriocomic genre. However, his

36 Rabelais's preoccupation with vulgar and grotesque body imagery is an important part of the carnivalesque genre. Craig sees examples of this in the book in Esther's prolonged cosmetic treatment, although he has perhaps overstated his case here. Cf. Green, 2000, p. 145. Craig sees 'masking' reflected in the multiple concealments and deceptions within the book: Mordecai urges Esther to conceal her ethnic identity; Haman conceals which people he is seeking to annihilate; Esther conceals the reason she has sought the king's clemency, and so on. Whether this genuinely comprises masking is not entirely clear, cf. Day, 1998. However, in this context it may not be coincidental that אֶסְתֵּר (Esther) can be revocalised as אָסְתֵּר (I am hidden).

emphasis on the uniqueness of Esther sounds a cautionary note. He considers the book, with its strong association with folk ritual and folk literature, to be unlike any other within the canon, and he argues that, because of its use in the Purim festival, it self-evidently lends itself to a carnivalesque reading. Thus he does not, on the face of it, provide encouragement that his technique might be applied beyond the scope within which he has been dealing.

David Valeta on Daniel

David Valeta's paper *Court or Jester Tales? Resistance and Social Reality in Daniel 1–6*, published in 2005, offers a Menippean reading of the first six chapters of Daniel. Scholars are generally united in their opinion that Daniel 1–6 takes a largely positive attitude towards empire (Valeta, 2005, p. 310). This is surprising on two fronts, Valeta suggests (2005, pp. 310–11). First, it is not the attitude that one might expect to find in literature set during the exile. Secondly, such a reading puts chapters 1–6 at odds with the remainder of the book, which provides a stringent critique of imperial rule.

Valeta points out the many exaggerations which the text appears to contain; for instance, the descriptions of royal rage (1:10; 2:5; 3:19); extravagance (5:1); and royal volte-face (3:28–30). The Jews are portrayed as pious and wise, the emperor as a dolt. He suggests that the text is serving its satirical purposes by 'creating fantastic situations with overblown characters' (Valeta, 2005, p. 312).

In the light of these issues, which Valeta suggests that traditional critical methods have been unable to eliminate, he proposes that chapters 1–6 should be reclassified as pre-novelistic Menippean satires. In view of its likely dating from the time of the Maccabean period, he reads it as a subversive jibe at the oppressive political forces of the day (Valeta, 2005, p. 312).

While the Menippean genre does not keep an epic distance from its subject, its heroes are often historical and legendary figures, whose feats are related with the use of free invention (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 114). Valeta sees this in the book of Daniel, pointing out the legendary role which Daniel appears to play within both the Bible and other ANE literature. Describing a number of apparent historical inconsistencies within the text, he concludes that this is an example of Menippean journalistic style:

> Either the author of Daniel was a poor historian, or these stories were composed for other purposes than strict historical accuracy. Ancient storytelling often mixes various motifs of history and fiction in a compelling fashion in order to create an atmosphere of verisimilitude, not historicity in the modern sense of that term. This feature is further enhanced in Menippean satire. (Valeta, 2005, p. 316)

In a similar vein, Valeta (2005, pp. 318–19) notes the frequent 'historical' references within the text, which appear to be unconstrained by normal time conventions, consistent with the use within the Menippea of what Bakhtin (1981, p. 84) terms *chronotropes*, distinct loci in time and space which shape the meaning of the narrative.

The Menippea show a deep connection with the social setting in which they are written. Valeta finds, in the proscription against prayer to any other than the monarch, a veiled allusion to the Maccabean crisis; and in the blundering, foolish kings of the Babylonian and Persian courts[37] an implicit criticism of Antiochus. (Valeta, 2005, pp. 319–20)

The benefit of Valeta's reading of the text is that it provides a fresh insight into the text, offering a narrative of resistance to empire, which is consonant with the remainder of the book and the social situation of both its narrative setting and chronological dating. The strength of Valeta's argument lies in the multiplicity of points of similarity between Bakhtin's description of the Menippea, and the text of Daniel 1–6. His case rests quite strongly on his presumptive dating of Daniel 1–6, placing it well within the Hellenistic period from whence Bakhtin shows the Menippean genre to arise. The texts under our consideration probably originated earlier than this, as I argued in chapter 2. However, I have made a case above that it is not implausible that the genre may predate the point of origin identified by Bakhtin.

Nehama Aschkenasy on Ruth

In 2007 feminist scholar Nehama Aschkenasy published a paper entitled *Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: The Carnivalesque in a Biblical Tale.*

Aschkenasy's point of commencement is that the book of Ruth appears to have comic features, and that a Bakhtinian reading would suit the purposes of feminist scholars, literary critics, postmodern interpreters and proponents of historical criticism.

Aschkenasy (2007, p. 440) offers plausible evidence in favour of her argument that the barley harvest is a carnival. There is an obliteration of normal social structures (Boaz feasts and sleeps with his labourers); there is plenty of wine; the harvest supper is characterised by a spirit of bawdiness and rule-breaking that she suggests emboldens Ruth to risk her reputation. She persuasively demonstrates some of the comic elements within the book: the naming of Naomi's sons (Little Illness and Destruction) and the exiting Orpah (whose name sounds like 'back of the neck') (Aschkenasy, 2007, p. 443).

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37 'Kings have little or no control over their own bodies. This is expressed in sleeplessness, unbidden dreams, fits of rage, and uncontrollable bowels' (Valeta, 2005, pp. 318–19).

Less credible to me is Aschkenasy's casting of Boaz in the role of Fool. With reference to the work of Henri Bergson, she likens the narrative to a Classical Greek comedy, with Boaz as the *senex*, Ruth as the *virgo*, and Naomi as the *servus delusus*. Boaz's formal speech and lofty pretensions are a cloak for both his sexual desire for the younger woman, and his ineptitude that requires her (flagrant) assistance to bring the desires to consummation (Aschkenasy, 2007, pp. 444–47). If in the ancient texts the role of Fool is occupied by the object of subversion and laughter, then one must ask what purpose such a portrayal of righteous Boaz might be intending to serve.

Aschkenasy notes the audacious proposition that Ruth makes to Boaz 'spread your cloak over your servant' (3:9), setting it in the context of the likely euphemistic description of her actions (that Ruth has either uncovered Boaz's genitals, or has undressed herself), and this may be a scandal scene in the Menippean tradition.

Aschkenasy makes little reference to Bakhtin's features of the Menippea, and seems content to liken the text with, in turn, the Menippea and Classical comedy, which are overlapping, but not identical categories. In conclusion, I find the multiplicity of attempts to link this text with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque genre to be unconvincing as a whole system; indeed at times they appear to be mutually inconsistent.[38] However, Aschkenasy makes some interesting observations on the subject of humour within the text, and her work on the carnivalesque possibilities of the barley harvest within the narrative deserves careful attention.

Towards a Diagnostic Heuristic

We have considered a number of scholars' approach to the carnivalesque genre within the Hebrew Bible. Kenneth Craig's pessimism about the wider

38 Aschkenasy's work on heteroglossia does not fall strictly within Bakhtinian terms. She finds multiple voices within the text; contrasting Boaz's formal and pompous style with Naomi's bitter punning. She makes an interesting case for a dialogic intertextuality between the sexually proactive women: Lot's daughters, Tamar, and Ruth (Aschkenasy, 2007, p. 448), but this does not appear to advance her argument towards a carnivalesque (as opposed to broader Bakhtinian) reading. In addition, her identification of Boaz as Fool is not entirely consistent with her argument that the object of subversion is Elimelech's wealthy family. Finally, her two distinct suggestions as to the purpose of the carnival (critique of the lawless society in the time of the judges, or an exilic polemic against the dismissal of foreign wives) suggest that she has not yet settled on an entirely internally consistent interpretation.

applicability of his method to texts other than Esther is not borne out by other scholars; many features of the Menippean genre have been identified in a wide range of narrative texts. However, in our enthusiasm to apply Bakhtin's thought, we must ensure that we do not do so uncritically; care must be taken not to place the text in a Procrustean bed. We must conduct an objective, responsible examination of the text, with a well-defined proposal and test criteria.

In general, the Bakhtinian model is best used as a heuristic, with scholars asking such questions as: 'How might a Bakhtinian reading enrich our understanding of this text?' (Green, 2005, p. 243); 'In what way is our text linked to the Bakhtinian novel form?' and 'Are there early features of seriocomical literature here?' (Craig, 1995, pp. 24, 37); 'Can an understanding of Bakhtin's work enliven our understanding of the text?' and 'Is there a possibility of conversation between Bakhtin's ideas and the biblical text?' (Boer, 2007, p. 3).

I have postulated a similar question: Are there seriocomic features within this text, the identification of which will enlighten our understanding of it? If so, what function do they serve? Since a statement can be evaluated more critically than a question, I have framed this inquiry as a proposal, which will be tested using the criteria we are establishing below. The proposal is this: *the central section of the book of Kings contains many elements of the seriocomic genre, which function in an artful way to serve an important literary and ideological purpose within the text.*

Turning our attention to the test criteria, there are several good models which can be used as paradigms for our investigation. Melissa Jackson, in the introduction to her book *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible* offers a 'dual-axis method' for the identification of humour in the Bible, which may prove a useful model for the current investigation. This combines a search for distinctive features of comedy with a cumulative evidence approach (Jackson, 2012, p. 5).

First, using the 'distinctive features analysis' proposed by Paul Lauter (Lauter, 1964, p. xx), Jackson lists diagnostic characteristics which enable her to identify potentially comic literary features. The second half of Jackson's axis is 'cumulative evidence'; arguing that, while a single element is not in itself diagnostic, the clustering of several is suggestive of humour. In this she follows Joel Kaminsky, whose investigation into the humour of the Isaac accounts is self-admittedly experimental:

> If one hopes to make any effort at discovering biblical humor, one must take a chance and construct a reasonable argument. My argument, like many arguments made by biblical scholars, including the Documentary Hypothesis itself, is based both on cumulative evidence, and on the

> argument's ability to explain various nuances in the text that have been previously overlooked or ignored. (Kaminsky, 2000)

An important criterion, then, according to Kaminsky, is that the proposed interpretation should be able to account for previously puzzling features in the text.

In chapter 1 we considered the work of Yairah Amit (Amit, 2000), who has worked on identifying concealed polemics in biblical narrative, and has established her own criteria for identifying them. Like Jackson, she identifies the need for forming the judgement based on a plurality of diagnostic signs. Amit's distinctive contributions are: first, that the putative reading should be supported by other biblical passages; and second, that the idea contained within the polemic should not be entirely novel within interpretive history.

A concealed polemic may be a single element within a complex text, whereas the presence of seriocomic writing is a more richly layered phenomenon within a text. For this reason I propose to adapt Amit's criterion of wider biblical support into a criterion of coherence *within the text*. So the putative analysis should contribute towards a coherent and comprehensible interpretation of the text in its wider context. The existence of wider biblical support for the interpretation would be an additional point of corroboration.

With regard to Amit's criterion of finding support elsewhere in interpretive history, we must sound a note of caution, without dismissing her scrupulousness altogether. We have seen that the subversive elements in a text may be deliberately concealed;[39] I would add that a seriocomic reading of the text may be vulnerable to the charge of levity, vulgarity, impiety or even scurrility. For this reason it may not have been identified in previous, more pious, generations of scholarship. However, a validating point would be if other, probably modern, scholars have found features consistent with the proposed interpretation.

Thus we can establish the following methodology. If a putative seriocomic reading is to be plausible, it needs to fulfil certain test criteria:

Test Criteria for the hermeneutic

1. It must contain a clustering of diagnostic features of the Menippean genre.
2. It should offer explanations for features within the text which are otherwise difficult to explain.

39 Amit, 2000, pp. 93–97; Heim, 2008, p. 926.

3. It should demonstrate coherence with the wider text in terms of proposed genre, approach and effect.
4. It should be supported by the findings of other scholars.

Craig and Aschkenasy have used some diagnostic features described by Stallybrass and Kirk, in addition to those of Bakhtin. While the seriocomic characteristics described by these three scholars overlaps, they are not identical. A summary of their diagnostic features is provided in the table below, which is set out in such a way as to attempt to align categories which approximate to one another.

Seriocomic features identified by Bakhtin, Kirk and Stallybrass

Bakhtin[a]	**Kirk**[b]	**Stallybrass**[c]
Fantasticality-free invention	*Topic*: Outlandish fiction	
Attention to ultimate questions	*Theme*: Pursuit of truth	
Testing the truth	*Audience*: Less learned than the writer but committed to the truth	
Attention to current issues		
Inserted genres	*Structure*: Medley of genres	Violation of linguistic norms
Multi-styled/toned	*Style*: Unconventional diction and vocabulary	
Scandal scenes		Transgression of social barriers Inversion of hierarchy Profanation of the sacred
Oxymoronic combinations		Transgression of bodily barriers
Slum naturalism		Replacement of fast by feast
Variable comic element		
Abnormal psychic states		
Action observed from an unusual vantage point		

Bakhtin	Kirk	Stallybrass
Utopian element		
Three-planed setting		

[a] Bakhtin, 1984a, pp. 114ff.
[b] Kirk, 1980, p. xiv.
[c] Stallybrass, 1985, pp. 113–14.

It will be seen that the three scholars emphasise different elements of the genre. It should be said, however, that Bakhtin's own fourteen-point list does not fully cover all of the elements which he identifies and considers in detail in *Rabelais and his world*. In particular, the inclusion of the grotesque, the profane and the scatological receive far more attention in *Rabelais* than in Bakhtin's list above. In view of this, and the fact that Stallybrass's features are fewer and broader, I have adopted the following diagnostic criteria, using a loose combination of the three approaches:

Diagnostic features of seriocomic literature

1. Violation of linguistic norms
    a. Heteroglossia
    b. Billingsgate, cursing and praise-abuse
2. Inversion of hierarchy
    a. Crowning/decrowning
3. Masking and Foolery
4. Feasting
5. Transgression of bodily barriers
    a. Scatological elements
    b. The grotesque
6. Profanation of the sacred
7. Fantasticality

In the following chapter, these diagnostic criteria will be applied to the book of Kings in order to test the proposal. First, however, it is necessary to consider another, not directly related, literary device, which will become relevant as we consider the texts in more detail in chapters 5 to 7. This is the *mise-en-abyme*, or the mirror within the text.

Mise-en-abyme

The *mise-en-abyme* was described by Lucien Dällenbach in his 1977 study *Le Récit Spéculaire*. The concept appears to derive from the heraldic device of a shield which contains a miniature representation of itself (Dällenbach, 1977, p. 17). *Mises-en-abyme* may also be found in art, such as, for example, *The Arnolfini Marriage* by Van Eyck, where a mirror behind the couple reveals more of the room than can be directly seen by the observer (Dällenbach, 1977, p. 20).

Within the literary field, the *mise-en-abyme* is a device whereby the whole of the narrative is reflected within one distinct portion of it. This portion may be intra-diegetic or meta-diegetic, that is, it may occur within the universe of the narrative and without interrupting narrative continuity (intra-diegetic); or it is meta-diegetic, occurring at a level narrated by the narrative itself, such as by means of dreams or other visual or auditory representations (Dällenbach, 1977, pp. 71–72). The *mise-en-abyme* thus acts as an internal mirror, which functions to interpret the whole. For it to be understood it must therefore be read within the entire narrative.

Key to identifying the *mise-en-abyme* is the presence of certain '*signaux d'alerte*', features which warn us of the possibility of *reflexivity* within the text. These include homonymy and repetition of text or circumstances. The marks of genuine reflexivity, Dällenbach says, are that the text itself appears self-conscious of the reflexivity, and that the postulated reflexivity is consistent with the reading of the whole text (Dällenbach, 1977, pp. 64–70).

The function of the *mise-en-abyme* is to comment upon the main narrative; it may concentrate and limit the meaning, or it may provide an expansion of the meaning which the context alone is unable to supply (Dällenbach, 1977, p. 81).[40] It appears to provide a self-regulation within the text:

> *On peut donc conclure que toute mise en abyme inverse le fonctionnement qui l'utilise: réagissant aux dispositions prises par le context, elle assure au récit une espèce d'auto-réglage.*[41] (Dällenbach, 1977, p. 94)

Further, its effect may be dependent upon the position of the *mise-en-abyme* within the narrative. Where it occurs at the centre of the text (as I shall argue is occurring in Kings), it provides a pivot whereby it is read within the framework

40 An example from the work of Shakespeare would be the 'mouse-trap' play in Hamlet.

41 We can therefore conclude that every *mise-en-abyme* inverts the operation which it uses: responding to factors according to the context, it provides within the narrative a kind of self-regulation.

of the preceding text, and at the same time it provides a device for interpretation of the text which succeeds it. It is thus 'présupposée et présupposante, objet et sujet d'interprétation'[42] (Dällenbach, 1977, p. 93). Where the *mise-en-abyme* is fragmented throughout the whole or a significant portion of the text, it tends to have a uniting effect within the narrative, providing what amounts to a sort of side-by-side commentary.

Clearly, this is not dissimilar to the Bakhtinian notion of polyphony, a concept which may have aided Dällenbach in the development of his theme, had he been aware of it. For example, Dällenbach briefly struggles with the permissibility of the delegation of authorial power to a character within the text,[43] in a section where his theory might perhaps benefit from the notion of Bakhtinian polyphony and heteroglossia. Dällenbach concludes, however, that a character may be considered competent to speak for the narrator, provided that character is invested with some mark of authentification, by which I think he means demonstrable objectivity at a narrative level. Among the possible agents which he identifies as suitable for this purpose are the foreigner, who appears within the text for this role alone; and the madman or innocent (Dällenbach, 1977, p. 73). These, of course, bear striking similarity to the role of the Fool within seriocomic literature, who has permission to tell truth because he exists outside the structures of power which he is critiquing.

The concept of *mise-en-abyme* has been adopted by literary theorists to represent a variety of devices: simple duplication within the text; infinite recursion; and paradoxical reflexion, where the mirror encompasses the text within which it is itself contained (Dällenbach, 1977, pp. 51–52; 215–21). I shall be arguing in chapters 5 and 7 that the central portion of Kings contains a complex arrangement of mirroring devices, which work in conjunction with its seriocomic features to subvert and cast into doubt certain accepted dogmas. First, however, my proposal concerning the presence of seriocomic features in the central section of Kings needs to be put to the test. This is the subject of the next chapter.

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42 Presupposed and presupposing; object and subject of interpretation.

43 'Assumées par l'auteur, [les réflexions] ne seraient pas mises on doute. Mais comment leur accorder sa confiance quand elles dependent d'un personage?' (Dällenbach, 1977, p. 72) (Such reflections, when provided by the author, cannot be in doubt. But how can they be trusted when they depend on a character?)

CHAPTER 4

An Investigation into the Seriocomic Elements at the Heart of Kings

> They're dreadfully fond of beheading people here; the great wonder is, that there's anyone left alive!
>
> LEWIS CARROLL, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865, pp. 126–27

⁘

In the previous chapter I formulated a proposal, along with diagnostic features and test criteria for my proposed hermeneutic. We will now examine Kings for the diagnostic features identified, and we will also apply the fourth of the test criteria: the supporting work of other scholars will be examined. The focus of the investigation will be upon the central portion of the book; that is, the Elijah-Elisha narratives and the Aram cycle. The reason for this is that empirical evidence would suggest that these more florid texts are more likely to yield grotesque, subversive, ribald features, compared to the more sober regnal accounts elsewhere in the book. However, the chapter will conclude with a brief comparison of this central section with the remainder of the book.

A previous substantial investigation into seriocomic literature in Kings has been performed by Francisco García-Treto, who has analysed the Jehu narrative (II Kgs 9,10). This work will be considered first.

Francisco García-Treto on Jehu

In response to the lack of scholarly consensus concerning Jehu's portrayal as a sympathetic or unsympathetic character, García-Treto offers a carnivalesque reading as a heuristic device to shed light on this conundrum. He uses Peter Stallybrass's morphology of carnivalesque literature, which I have described in chapter 3, as a set of criteria on which to base his investigation. He also draws more explicitly upon the work of Bakhtin.

With regard to the structure of the text, García-Treto identifies a number of features of possible significance for the investigation. He considers that it is framed by crowning (9:1–14) and decrowning (10:29–31) events: the anointing

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of Jehu and the Deuteronomic judgment upon his reign respectively. Crowning and decrowning of the carnival king is described by Bakhtin as the primary carnivalistic act (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 124).

Within these brackets García-Treto demonstrates two symmetrical tripartite narratives, represented below.[1]

II Kings 9:14–37	**II Kings 10:1–28**
Movement towards and in Jezreel	Movement towards and in Samaria
A 9:15–26	A′ 10:1–11
killing of Joram king of Israel	killing of family of Ahab (=family of Joram)—royal house of Israel
B 9:27–29	B′10:12–14
killing of Ahaziah king of Judah	killing of family of Ahaziah—royal house of Judah
C 9:30–37	C 10:15–28
killing of Jezebel the alien queen	killing of worshippers of the alien god
scatological reference: dung	scatological reference: latrine

Thus the violence in the first half is mirrored but augmented in the second half, culminating in each case with the extermination of the alien woman or priests, accompanied by features of scatological humour: 'The corpse of Jezebel shall be like dung on the field in the territory of Jezreel' (II. 9:37); 'Then they demolished the pillar of Baal, and destroyed the temple of Baal, and made it a latrine to this day' (II. 10:27).

García-Treto describes five scenes within the text which demonstrate features of carnival as described by Stallybrass or Bakhtin.

***1. The commissioning of Jehu* (*II. 9:1–13*).**

The individual sent by Elijah to anoint (crown) Jehu is variously referred to as אֶחָד מִבְּנֵי הַנְּבִיאִים (one of the sons of the prophets; 9:1); נַעַר (youth; 9:4,6); הַמְשֻׁגָּע (*pual* participle of שגע = madman; 9:11); אֶת־הָאִישׁ וְאֶת־שִׂיחוֹ ('the sort and how they babble' (NRSV); 9:11) but never by name: he is a 'nobody'. He is given absurdly clear, fool-proof instructions by Elijah (seek Jehu, draw him aside, anoint him, leave; 9:2–3) but oversteps his remit enormously (9:5–10).

> The effect is incongruous, as if a masquerading "sorcerer's apprentice" had unwittingly pronounced a spell he cannot control. (García-Treto, 1990, p. 55)

1 Modified from García-Treto, 1990, p. 54.

García-Treto sees this as an example of hierarchical transgression, a carnivalistic *mésalliance*, a farcical association between 'the general and the "nobody" who anoints him,' the king who 'has had kingship thrust upon him by the agency of a novice "madman"' (García-Treto, 1990, p. 55).

***2. Jehu's chariot race* (*11. 9:14–29*).**
There is a breathless sense of movement in the passage. Jehu furiously drives his chariot (רכב; this word and its cognates appear 16 times in the two chapters); there is repetition of a number of other verbs of motion. Each journey—from Ramoth-Gilead to Jezreel and from Jezreel to Samaria—culminates in the implied movement of the chariot and rider from *outside* to *inside*, with a symbolic invasion which prefigures the desecration and annihilation of Jezebel and the temple of Baal. Such transgression of spacial boundaries is a feature of carnivalistic literature according to both Stallybrass and Bakhtin (Stallybrass, 1985, p. 114; Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 124).

***3. The downfall of Jezebel* (*11. 9:30–37*).**
Another key feature of carnivalesque literature is the use of oaths, cursing and billingsgate.[2] García-Treto (1990, pp. 57ff.) demonstrates this element in the words of Jehu, in the 'pungent insult' of 9:22 'What peace, with all the whoring and witchcraft of your mother Jezebel?';[3] and in his words about Jezebel, 'see now to this cursed woman, for she is a king's daughter' (9:34), suggesting that in fact they amount to Rabelaisian praise-abuse.[4] Furthermore this scene may contain another crowning (the coiffuring of Jezebel 9:30) and decrowning (her defenestration 9:33). Finally, the *lower bodily strata* are in much evidence in this scene, with Jezebel's body turned to dung, and her blood spattering the walls like urine (cf. 9:8).

***4. The extermination of Ahab's family* (*11. 10:1–17*).**
Fourthly, following the shuffling of alliances which takes place in 10:1–5, the violence culminates in the grotesque spectacle of seventy heads in baskets.

***5. Annihilation of the Baal cult* (*11. 10:18–28*).**
The final carnivalesque scene, mirroring the death of Jezebel, is marked by the *profanation*[5] of the temple of Baal; in a piece of gloriously grotesque writing

2 It will be recalled that Bakhtin does not provide a formal definition for this word, but uses it to refer to oaths, curses and insults.

3 García-Treto's translation.

4 Cf. Bakhtin, 1984b, pp. 324ff.

5 Cf. Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 123.

the priests are murdered in their festal robes and their temple turned into a latrine (García-Treto, 1990, p. 59).

García-Treto concludes by considering the function of the carnivalistic writing in the passage, whether it is aimed towards the Northern Kingdom alone, or whether it is also a sideways censure of the Davidic monarchy. He suggests that this is an example of the Bakhtinian concept of pregnant death, whereby death brings about rebirth, and the lower bodily strata serve as fertiliser for the new life.[6] In the fall of the house of Ahab new possibilities emerge (García-Treto, 1990, pp. 61–2).

I do not fully agree with García-Treto in his interpretation of Jehu's decrowning. Clearly the anointing of Jehu in II Kings 9 is the point in the text where he seizes power, and the narrative which follows it has marked seriocomic character, as García-Treto has demonstrated. Jehu's 'decrowning', however, is less convincing, in that his reign terminates in the standard regnal account in II Kings 10:34–36.[7] However, I otherwise find García-Treto's careful application of the carnivalisation lens to be compelling, successfully bringing new light to this gruesome and sometimes obscure narrative.

We will now consider the wider text of the central portion of Kings for evidence of seriocomic features. The diagnostic features will each be considered in turn.

Examining for Diagnostic Features of the Seriocomic Genre

Violation of Linguistic Norms

Heteroglossia

Heteroglossia, that is, the presence within a text of internal variations within a language (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 67), is an important feature of seriocomic writing. Dialectic and linguistic diversity reflect, for Bakhtin, the struggle between centralising and decentralising forces in society; the forces which seek either monologism or dialogue; dogmatism or ambiguity.

A similar idea was proposed by Charles Ferguson in 1959, when he published a paper entitled 'Diglossia'. He defines this term to refer to a situation where two or more varieties of the same language are used by speakers under

6 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 1984b, p. 435.

7 In private correspondence, Professor García-Treto has defended this event as a decrowning, arguing that Jehu's demise in II Kings 10:28–36 is 'a most ambiguous coda', with his extermination of Baal (v. 28) attenuated by the golden calves he permitted to remain in Bethel and Dan (v. 29); and with the dynastic promise from YHWH (v. 30a) attenuated by its limitation to the fourth generation (v. 30b).

different conditions. Diglossia, which he describes within four diverse languages (Arabic, Modern Greek, Swiss German and Haitian Creole), is characterised by the presence of a 'high' and a 'low' variety of speech. Of particular relevance to our purpose, Ferguson has traced the phenomenon in Arabic as far back as written records exist (Ferguson, 1959, p. 234).

The relative characteristics of 'high' and 'low' language variants reflect Bakhtin's thinking, although due to the delay in publication of Bakhtin's writings, neither scholar would have been aware of the other's work. The 'high' variant is used for official discourse and lofty artistic expression such as political speeches, poetry, sermons or news broadcasts. By contrast, 'low' language is used for conversations with family and friends, for folk literature, and (in the modern era) for captions on political cartoons. Thus it is the language of the home, vernacular narrative, and the lampoon. High language carries more prestige, and because it tends to be written down, it becomes stabilised in texts, whereas 'low' is a more oral form, although Ferguson's research has found that low variants may persist for centuries or even millennia (pp. 237–40). Thus the insertion of diglossic language within a text would be supportive of a tentative diagnosis of the seriocomic genre.

The Hebrew Bible contains occasional instances of non-standard language scattered throughout, but concentrated most strongly in certain texts, such as Hosea, Qohelet, certain Psalms[8] and the northern narratives of Kings (Rendsburg, 2003, p. 8). We will consider the Kings texts in more detail shortly, but first we need to consider the scholarly discussion around the nature of these linguistic anomalies.

Deviant Linguistic Forms in the Hebrew Bible

The origin and nature of these linguistic variants has been hotly contested for over two decades. Scholars have tended to divide themselves into two parties on the issue: 'maximalist', tending to see many of the anomalies as 'northernisms' (that is, deriving from the Northern Kingdom), and 'minimalists' who take a more sceptical view of this and place more emphasis on the possibility of other influences within the language.

The leading maximalist is Gary Rendsburg, who has published extensively in the field. In 1991 he coined the term 'Israelian Hebrew' to describe the dialect of the northern kingdom (Rendsburg, 1991, p. 88). Around the same time he developed a methodology for identifying 'northern' texts in the Hebrew Bible (Rendsburg, 1990, pp. 15–16). He described four criteria, aiming that the degree of confidence in diagnosing a northern text would be indicated by how many of the criteria it matched.

8 Psalms 9–10, 16, 29, 36, 45, 53, 58, 74, 116, 132, 133, 140, 141.

1. *Distribution*. The linguistic anomaly is found in a narrative dealing with the northern kingdom
2. *Opposition*. The word used (especially if it is a *hapax legomenon*) is one which has a known Judaean Hebrew alternative. This is to avoid the possibility of a word being assumed to be northern simply because of its rarity and where it happens to occur.
3. *Extra-biblical sources*. The element in question is found in other northwestern Semitic languages such as Aramaic or Phoenician.
4. *Clustering.* The text contains several linguistic anomalies.

Rendsburg has even been confident enough about the nature of Israelian Hebrew variants to produce a 'Comprehensive Guide to Israelian Hebrew' incorporating a lexicon and grammar (Rendsburg, 2003).

However, his sanguinity is not shared by minimalist scholars, leading among whom are Ian Young, William Schniedewind and Daniel Sivan, as well as Daniel Fredericks and David Talshir. These scholars are more sceptical than Rendsburg about our ability to diagnose northern speech in the Hebrew Bible with any confidence.[9]

While the exact nature of the linguistic variants remains uncertain, an arguably more significant question for the present investigation concerns the aetiology and purpose of their presence within the text.

In 1995 Rendsburg published a detailed assessment of what he terms the 'foreign factor' in the Hebrew Bible (Rendsburg, 1995). In this he argues that

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9 Schniedewind and Sivan take issue with Rendsburg for making too many unprovable assumptions, for example that the Hebrew of the northern tribes of Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali would be influenced by Phoenician because of their proximity to Tyre (Schniedewind & Sivan, 1997, p. 306). They also critique him for circularity of argument: texts are designated as northern because of their linguistic oddities, and the same variants are then inferred to be northern, because of their presence within these 'northern' texts (p. 311, cf. Young, 1997, p. 9).

Ian Young argues that Rendsburg overlooks too many exceptions. 'Rendsburg argues that a feature should be considered Israelian if a significant number of attestations are found in his corpus of Israelian Hebrew texts. Rarely, however, do we find a feature of Israelian Hebrew that cannot be paralleled in a text that Rendsburg must admit is Judahite' (Young, 1997, p. 13).

Similar critiques have also been levelled by David Talshir, who surveys Rendsburg's northernisms and disputes many of them (Talshir, 2003) and Daniel Fredericks (Fredericks, 1996), who feels that Rendsburg has failed to account for an abundance of 'uneven, paradoxical, if not clearly contradictory [linguistic] evidence' (p. 19).

These criticisms are briefly addressed by Rendsburg in 2002, who defends his thesis, pointing out that the seriously limited number of extant texts means that we are working in the territory of 'burden of evidence' rather than certainty (Rendsburg, 2002, p. 25 n. 25).

linguistic anomalies may arise by three means: through diachronic developments of the language during the course of a text's formation; through geographical differences in dialect; and through variations in register, for example, the diglossia that exists between the written and the spoken, the urban and the rural (p. 177).

In the same paper, Rendsburg places a considerable emphasis on the deliberate act of foreignisation, that is, the insertion by the writer of words or grammatical forms which would sound alien to the text's original readers. This particularly occurs when the narrative is set in a foreign land, or is about a foreigner,[10] or when it is in a text (particularly a prophetic oracle) directed at a foreign nation[11] (Rendsburg, 1995a, p. 178).

This key concept of foreignisation has also been identified by other scholars. Ian Young,[12] while differing significantly with Gary Rendsburg on the nature of the linguistic variants, agrees that they are intentionally inserted to foreignise the speech of characters within the narrative. Indeed, he suggests that while some of the variants may have been drawn from various Israelian dialects, others may have been entirely idiosyncratic 'funny speech'.

> We must therefore raise the possibility that beside genuine foreign and dialectal forms, the Hebrew author could also draw on a body of clichéd 'non-standard' forms. To draw some modern analogies, while parodies of foreign or dialectal speech will utilize certain language features which are felt to be absolutely characteristic of the target of the parody (e.g. Jah—German; Och Aye—Scottish), other accent features used will be from the general category of 'funny speech', which is built from a mish-mash of many different varieties of 'non-standard' language. (Young, 1995, pp. 65–6)

Rendsburg sees this intentional foreignisation as a result of Israel's preoccupation with distinctiveness:

> The Israelites were so aware of their distinctiveness, especially in the realms of society and religion, that all efforts were made to mark the foreignness of non-Israelites. (Rendsburg G., 1995, p. 190)

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10 This is *style-switching*, as defined by Kaufman in Kaufman, 1988, p. 55.

11 This phenomenon Rendsburg has previously termed addressee-switching (Rendsburg G., 1991, p. 96).

12 I am grateful to Professor Young for assisting me by providing a copy of his paper, and for a helpful discussion via email on this subject.

This idea may be plausible when it is the speech of genuine foreigners—Moabites or Arameans, for example—which is being so marked. However, when it is the speech of inhabitants of the northern kingdom Israel which is being foreignised, we need to consider what might be the purpose of such a literary device. If Bakhtin is correct, deviant language within a text might be a device intended to highlight the struggle between centralising and marginal forces in society, between authorised speech and market-place gossip, folklore or dissenting malcontents.

With these questions in mind, we will now consider the text of the central section of Kings for evidence of linguistic transgression.

Linguistic Variants in Kings

It is widely acknowledged that the parts of Kings which deal with the Northern Kingdom are peppered with linguistic anomalies, although as we have seen, there is no consensus about whether they are Israelian Hebrew, 'funny speech', or borrowed from the nations around. These variants are particularly prevalent in the Elijah-Elisha narratives, and most of all, in the speech of Elisha (Young, 1997, p. 10; Schniedewind & Sivan, 1997, p. 320; Burney, 1903, p. 208). The following list of examples from Elisha's direct speech offers some representative examples.

1. There are four instances of a variant form of the second person feminine singular (כִי-) or plural (יְכִי-) pronominal suffix (II. 4:2,3,7). These are the only attestations in Kings of this variant.
2. There are two uses of a variant second person feminine singular pronoun (אַתִי, II. 4:16; 8:1). This is also found once in the mouth of the Shunammite's husband (II. 4:18) and once in the mouth of Jeroboam, King of Israel (I. 14:2).
3. Elisha uses a variant form of the feminine singular demonstrative (זֹה rather than זֹאת, II. 6:19); again, this is the only instance of the word in Kings.
4. In II Kings 4:13,14 Elisha twice says מֶה לֵעָשׂוֹת 'What to do?' This form of the interrogative is unusual (though by no means unique[13]); the expected form would be מַה לַעֲשׂוֹת; מֶה being used in standard Hebrew to precede the consonants *ayin* or *chet*.[14]
5. In the same chapter, Elisha says הֲיֵשׁ לְדַבֶּר־לְךָ אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אוֹ אֶל־שַׂר הַצָּבָא using the coordinating conjunction אוֹ, in a place where אִם is to be expected (v. 13). אוֹ is usually used to coordinate between alternatives expressed in a single word (e.g. Lev 13:51).

13 Rendsburg argues that it is usually found in northern texts (Rendsburg, 2002, p. 41).

14 Cf. Van der Merwe, Naudé, & Kroeze, 1999, p. 324.

It is not Elisha's speech alone which demonstrates the presence of variant Hebrew. Anomalous forms are found in narrative and direct speech, throughout the central chapters of Kings. Such forms include *hapax legomena*,[15] phonological variances,[16] and unusual verbal forms[17] (Schniedewind & Sivan, 1997, *passim*).

Are these foreignisations present because the text originated in the Northern Kingdom, or because they have been deliberately foreignised by the author? Gary Rendsburg has provided some very helpful data to help elucidate this matter, although as I will show, I do not fully agree with the conclusions he draws from them.

He identifies what he considers to be the 'northern' texts of Kings (Rendsburg, 2002). These chapters largely comprise the central chapters of Kings which form the focus of my study, as will be shown shortly. Rendsburg then performs a close reading of these 'northern' texts, and enumerates every instance of what he considers to be 'northern' speech. Whether or not we accept his understanding of their origin, they are undoubtedly unusual variant forms. Rendsburg identifies 161 such features within the 700 verses comprising the northern narratives.

His findings are shown in Figure 1, which is derived from Rendsburg, 2002, p. 144.

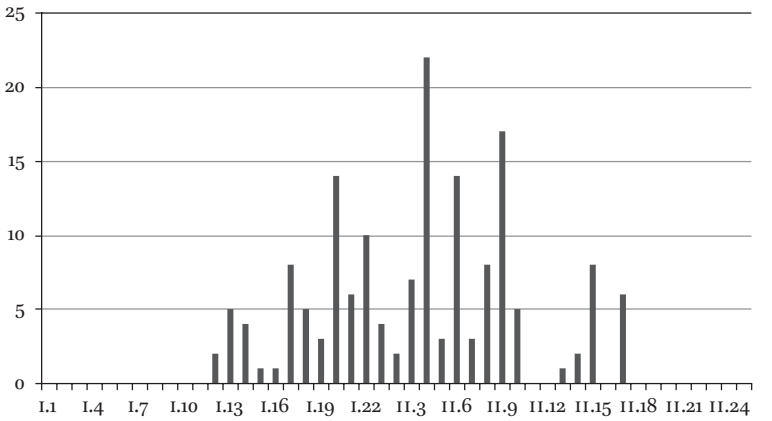

FIGURE 1 *Frequency of Rendsburg's 'northernisms' in Kings, by chapter.*

15 E.g. אֶכִילָה in I. 19:8.

16 E.g. the non-elision of the definite article in בְּהַשָּׂדֶה , in the *ketiv* of II. 7:12.

17 E.g. the retention of the *lamed* in לְקָחְנִי in I. 17:11.

Rendsburg proceeds to examine where these linguistic anomalies occur: their relative distribution across narrative or direct discourse (test 1); and their relative distribution between the Elijah/Elisha and non-Elijah/Elisha narratives (test 2). I have represented his results in Figure 2 (drawn from pp. 143, 147):

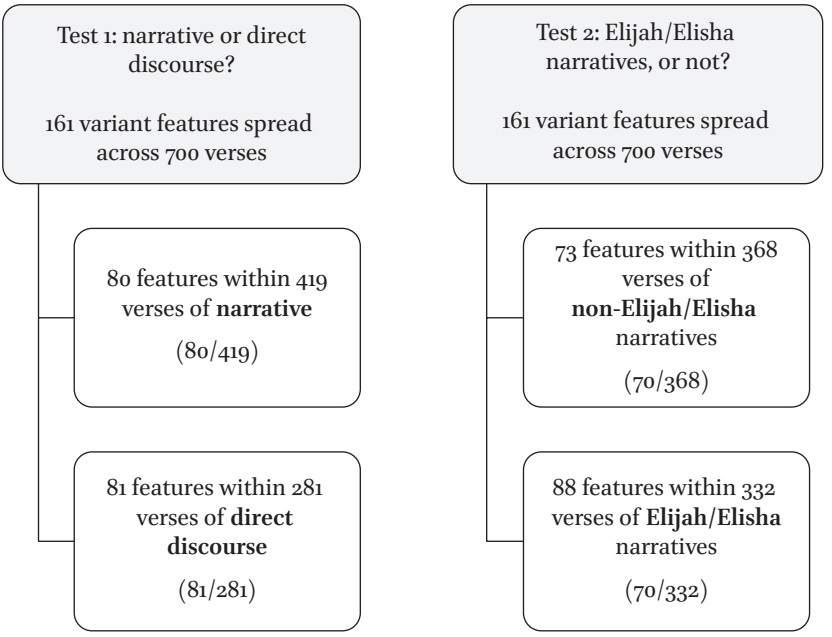

FIGURE 2 *Distribution of Rendsburg's linguistic anomalies.*

Rendsburg does not consider that the figures are sufficiently slanted towards direct discourse to justify the conclusion that this is artful writing, that the northern redactor is deliberately foreignising the voice of his characters. He therefore concludes that the presence of these features is more likely to be related to the incorporation of northern material, which was naturally foreign-sounding at the point of origin.

> I would argue that a much larger dichotomy in the percentages would be necessary to confirm the view that the higher frequency of [northern] traits in direct discourse versus their less frequent appearance in narration was in the mind of the writers as an intentional literary device. (pp. 143–5).

However, a more objective method of assessing the likely significance of these figures is to perform a χ-squared test. The test is described and the calculation shown in Appendix 1, and the results are given below.

The questions are these:

- Test 1. How likely is it that the language of direct discourse contains significantly[18] more variant forms than the language of narrative?
- Test 2. How likely is it that the language of the Elijah/Elisha narratives contains significantly more variant forms than the language of the non-Elijah/Elisha passages?

For test 1, the χ-squared test shows that the likelihood of significance is greater than 99%. However, for test 2, the χ-squared test shows that the probability is less than 95%, which means it does not meet the standard statistical criterion to prove significance.

Therefore, *contra* Rendsburg, there is good evidence for an excess of linguistic variants within direct speech in the central section. However, we cannot prove that it is more prevalent within the Elijah/Elisha narratives.

Of course a statistical test can only indicate the existence of a bias, not its cause. Nevertheless, using Rendsburg's own logic, the findings add weight to the argument that the variant language is an artful device of the narrator. If the linguistic variants were simply due to the source of the text, we would expect them to be evenly distributed between narrative and speech.

Arguing from the assumption of deliberate foreignisation, Ian Young has suggested that these eccentricities of speech might serve one of two purposes. If the Elisha texts were written by a Judaean, then the variant forms may have been inserted to mark Elisha out as a northerner. Conversely, if the texts were by a northern writer, then they may have been intended to indicate his town or village of origin (Young, 1997, p. 10). However, it is possible that the purpose is more subtle than this; not merely to indicate exclusion (he's from 'up north') or inclusion (he's one of ours), but to introduce heteroglossia, and hence non-normalising voices, into the text.

David Fredericks has argued that the reason certain dialects were more 'permeable' to variant forms may relate to their speakers' greater receptivity to colloquialisms, in other words, that people in the north were 'less repulsed by the vernacular' (Fredericks, 1996, p. 20). This suggestion would certainly appear plausible, both in terms of providing an explanation for the apparent

18 The term 'significance', as used here, refers to a specific statistical criterion: that the probability is greater than 95%.

increased incidence of linguistic variants in the so-called 'northern' dialect, and because it echoes our own modern experience of linguistic cultural snobbery. If Fredericks is correct, then the speech of Elisha might well have been regarded with some disdain by readers who spoke the purer form of the language.

Recalling Ferguson's point that 'low speech' is of low prestige, and is the language of lampoonery, it is thus possible that the artful characterisation of Elisha as a strongly accented 'man of the north' has comedic effect. In the seriocomic genre, we recall, the 'official' is contested by the vernacular, the monologic is interrupted by variant voices, and the vulgar intrudes upon the solemn. Inversion is never complete, however; a new monologism is not established to replace the old. So if Elisha is indeed to be understood as lampooning Judaean rectitude, he will not do so without cost to his own status and gravity. This will be explored further in chapter 5.

Billingsgate

Within the seriocomic genre in particular, the use of familiar colloquialisms—often descending into billingsgate—permits the challenge of the official by the unofficial (Bakhtin, 1984b, pp. 145ff.). There are a number of texts within the central passage where insults and curses are used.

The language in the central section of Kings is lively, full of exclamations, rhetorical repetitions and stylistic idioms. Additionally, however, a search for language that is abusive or unexpectedly challenging reveals a significant number of insulting or aggressive verbal exchanges. Each will be considered briefly.

1 Kings 18:17

> [Ahab to Elijah] Is that you, Troubler of Israel?

Ahab refers to Elijah as עֹכֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל, usually translated 'Troubler of Israel'. The verb עכר carries the sense of muddying or polluting; it is used of Achan[19] in Joshua 6:18; 7:25 and 1 Chronicles 2:7. It is unclear on what basis Simon DeVries claims that 'the Hebrew suggests one who is consorting with dark supernatural forces in order to render harm' (DeVries, 2003, p. 217); however, the term is clearly intended to be insulting.

19 It is likely that the name Achan is deliberate wordplay on this root (cf. Josh 7:2; *HALOT*, p. 824).

1 Kings 18:27

קִרְאוּ בְקוֹל־גָּדוֹל כִּי־אֱלֹהִים הוּא כִּי שִׂיחַ וְכִי־שִׂיג לוֹ וְכִי־דָרֶךְ לוֹ אוּלַי יָשֵׁן הוּא וְיִקָּץ

> [Elijah to the prophets of Baal] Call in a louder voice, for he is a god! Perhaps he is meditating; perhaps he has withdrawn to the side; perhaps he is on a journey; perhaps he is asleep and must be woken.

My translation probably underestimates the pungency of the insult. The precise meaning of the words שִׂיחַ and שִׂיג is unclear. The first noun, שִׂיחַ, appears to carry the sense of meditating or conversing; its cognate verb שׂיח is found, for example, in Psalms 77:13 (*qal*) and 143:5 (*polel*) (*HALOT*, p. 1319). It may carry a sense of verbal intensity, as described by Hans-Peter Müller (Müller, 1969), who relates it to the word צוח, to shout loudly. The second word, שִׂיג, is a *hapax legomenon*, believed on etymological grounds to be a 'withdrawing to the side', perhaps for the purposes of defaecation (*HALOT*, p. 1319). In the light of this Rendsburg suggests that שִׂיחַ also relates to excretion, comparing it with its Arabic cognate ŝḤḤ, which means to urinate or excrete, and that the two words therefore form a hendiadys with scatological functions. (Rendsburg, 1988). If Rendsburg is correct, the translators of the LXX entirely missed the implication, rendering the two words as the single ἀδολεσχία (conversation). We observed in chapter 3 that in certain places the LXX appears to have 'smoothed out' problematic portions of the Hebrew, so the blander ἀδολεσχία does not disprove Rendsburg's hypothesis.

Again, although the exact nature of the insult is uncertain, it is evident that Elijah is mocking the prophets of Baal, and his sarcasm (כִּי־אֱלֹהִים הוּא: for he is a god) is unmistakeable.

1 Kings 20:10–11

> [Ben-Hadad] Thus may the gods do to me, and more, if a handful of the dust of Samaria is sufficient for all the people at my feet [. . .]
>
> [Ahab] One who is putting on his armour should not boast like one who is removing it.

The exact meaning of Ben-Hadad's words is ambiguous; the LXX has the rather obscure sentence:

> Ταδε ποιησαι μοι ὁ θεος και ταδε προσθειη, εἰ ἐκποιησει ὁ χους Σαμαρειας ταις ἀλώπεξιν παντι τῳ λαῳ τοις πεζοις μου.

> So may God do to me, and even more, if the dust of Samaria is sufficient for all the foxes of the people of my footsoldiers.

Nonetheless, the tone of the insult is clear, even if its precise meaning is opaque. This is flyting;[20] a stylised exchange of insults: Ben-Hadad's oath formula (Conklin, 2011, p. 23) is answered with a proverb,[21] more succinct in the Hebrew (אַל־יִתְהַלֵּל חֹגֵר כִּמְפַתֵּחַ) than its English translation suggests. It is an additional ironic twist that at the end of the story it is Ben-Hadad's men, on his behalf, who appear before the victorious king of Israel in sackcloth and rope, that is, with their armour removed (v. 31, cf. v. 11).

1 Kings 21:20–24

> [Ahab] Have you found me, my enemy? [...]
>
> [Elijah to Ahab] I have found you because you have sold yourself over to do evil in the eyes of YHWH. Behold, I am bringing disaster upon you. And I will consume and after you I will cut off unto Ahab the one that urinates against a wall, slave and free, in Israel. And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nabat and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, in consideration of the grievance with which you have grieved, and you have caused Israel to sin. And also to Jezebel, the word of YHWH. The dogs will eat Jezebel within the ramparts of Jezreel. The dead of Ahab within the city, the dogs will eat, and the dead in the field, the birds of the sky will eat.

In 1 Kings 21 Ahab's crime against Naboth is not merely murder; it is the termination of his line.[22] Naboth will have neither grave nor sons to bury him; he will not have inheritance to pass on or descendant to inherit. In response, Elijah's words predict the same end for Ahab. His line will terminate through a creative application of the law of talion (Walsh, 2006, pp. 54–55).

However Elijah's words carry a deeper weight than most standard translations convey. The expression מַשְׁתִּין בְּקִיר (that which urinates against a wall)

20 It satisfies M.R. Eaton's criteria for the identification of flyting in the Bible: 'agonistic setting with a public venue, contenders from opposing armies, verbal exchanges, insults and oaths in formulaic language, and martial outcome' (Eaton, 1994, p. 9).

21 Cf. Hildebrandt, 1994.

22 Cf. II. 9:26. 'For the blood of Naboth and for the blood of his children that I saw yesterday, says YHWH, I swear I will repay you on this very plot of ground'.

occurs six times[23] in the Hebrew Bible; each time to refer to the extermination of the entire line of a king or ruler. In this context, the phrase is generally understood to be metonymy for Ahab's male heirs.[24]

While this is clearly a familiar expression, the crude choice of wording should not be overlooked. The natural reading of the phrase would be that it refers to the severance of the male genitalia.

Literary critic William Empson has written of seven types of ambiguity in writing (Empson, 1930). In particular, a type I ambiguity occurs when a word or grammatical structure can have meanings at several different levels (Empson, 1930, p. 2). A type II ambiguity is found when the grammar and syntax would permit more than one meaning but that only one is ultimately found to be valid (Empson, 1930, p. 48). Elijah's words would appear to fit a combination of these two criteria. Hence two possible readings emerge from the phrase, diverge into different meanings, but then recombine into a single sense. This might be illustrated thus:

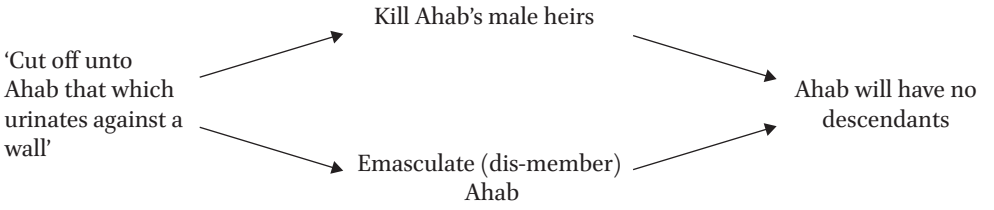

FIGURE 3 *Forms of ambiguity in 1 Kings 21:21.*

The crudity of the expression is consistent with the Bakhtinian concept of billingsgate, but the metaphor becomes more florid still as Elijah turns his attention to Jezebel and predicts the eating of her and Ahab's bodies by dogs, prophecies whose grotesque fulfilment the narrative later takes pains to demonstrate.[25]

1 Kings 22:24

> [Zedekiah to Micaiah. Accompanied by a blow to the cheek] Which way did the Spirit of God go when it left me to speak with you?

23 1 Sam 25:22,34; 1 Kgs 14:10; 16:11; 21:21, 11. 9:8.

24 E.g. Cogan, 2001; Walsh, 1996.

25 1. 22:38, 11. 9:36.

To be struck on the cheek was a humiliating insult in the ancient world. In the epic of Gilgamesh, the dying Enkidu curses a prostitute with a stream of invective (Pritchard, 1950, p. 1986).

> Come lass, I will decree thy [fa]te, [a f]ate that shall not end for all eternity
> [I will] curse thee with a great curse, [an oath], whose curses shall soon overtake thee [...]
> [...] shall be cast into thy house, [...] the road shall be thy dwelling place [...]
> [The besotted and the thirsty shall smite] thy cheek!

In the Hebrew Bible the *motif* of striking the cheek is used several times in clearly insulting situations. For example, in Lamentations 3:20[26] we read

> Let him give his cheek (לְחִי) to the one who strikes
> Let him get his fill of disgrace.

Thus this incident in I Kings 22 is suggestive of Rabelaisian-style beating and cursing, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 212).

II Kings 2:23

> [Youths to Elisha] Go on up, baldy! Go on up, baldy!

Some scholars have argued that the youths may have been referring to a distinguishing mark of the prophet, such as a tonsure (Montgomery, 1951, p. 355; Sweeney, 2007, p. 275), although this is conjecture (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 38). Alternatively, perhaps, is that they were making a perjorative comparison with the hairy Elijah (II. 1:8).[27] In any case, Elisha takes the insult so seriously that he invokes a terrible punishment upon them.

II Kings 3:13,14

> [Elisha to Joram of Israel] What have I to do with you? Go to the prophets of your father and the prophets of your mother [...] As YHWH of hosts

26 In similar vein see c.f. Lam 3:30; Mic 5:1 (4:14 MT); Ps 3:7 (3:8 MT); Job 16:10.

27 The word בַּעַל, when used in the construct, usually refers to the possession of a quality (Joüon & Muraoka, 1991, pp. § 129, j). Thus אִישׁ בַּעַל שֵׂעָר, (II. 1:8) probably indicates that Elijah was hirsute (although some translations have 'he wore a garment of hair' e.g. ESV).

> lives, before whom I serve, if it weren't for the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, whom I respect, I would not look at you or glance at you.

Robert Cohn (2000, pp. 21–22) points out how Elisha's dismissive words to Joram, which link him with his infamous parents, are at odds with the verdict given by the narrator in verse 2:

> He did evil in the eyes of YHWH, but not like his father and his mother. For he caused the removal of the altar of Baal which his father had made.

On the assumption that we are intended to understand the authorial summary as God's view of the situation, there is a hint here that Elisha is exceeding his divine mandate. Further examples of this will be explored in chapter 5.

While the role of the prophet traditionally permitted a certain degree of immunity, or license, in addressing the king, Elisha's words here are not only brash, but also implicitly slanderous. We might compare this, for example, with the manner in which Nathan approaches David with the news of his transgression in II Samuel 12:7–12. Nathan's words are bold; Elisha's are insolent.

II Kings 9:22,34

> [Jehu to Joram] What peace? As long as the whoring of Jezebel your mother and her many sorceries continue?
>
> [Jehu of Jezebel] See to that accursed woman and bury her, for she was a king's daughter.

The slur upon Jezebel's marital fidelity appears to be pure fiction; there is nothing to suggest that she was other than a faithful wife. Rather, the insult refers to her cultic infidelity (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 110; Gray, 1970, p. 547). Effectively, Jehu is taking the opportunity to call his enemy the son of a whore.

Both of these speeches by Jehu were identified as billingsgate by Francisco García-Treto. In particular, the second, which simultaneously honours and insults the queen, is typical of the 'praise-abuse' described by Bakhtin (García-Treto, 1990, pp. 57–58, cf. Bakhtin, 1984b, pp. 163–65).

In summary, then, in the central section of Kings we find instances of mockery (I. 18:27; I. 22:24; II. 2:23); insulting name-calling (I. 18:17; I. 21:20; II. 2:23; II. 9:34); physical violence (I. 22:24), sarcasm (I. 18:27), flyting (I. 20:10), sexual innuendo (I. 21:21; II. 9:22) and sheer insolence (I. 21:20; I. 22:16; II. 3:13,14). There are references to the unclean dogs and their defilement of corpses; to

sexual promiscuity; to urination and perhaps even, elliptically, to castration and defaecation. While few, if any, of these instances quite plumb the depths of billingsgate in Rabelais, they are probably sufficiently insulting to add credibility to our search for linguistic transgression.

However, in Bakhtinian thought billingsgate is used by the unofficial to challenge the official. In the list of insults above, not all are used by the powerless against the powerful, at least in the conventional sense of power relationships. It is interesting to reflect on this further. Where does the power lie in the Ahab-Elijah relationship, for instance? Does Ahab's name-calling reflect his insolence towards the higher authority of the prophet, or is it a boorish lapse of courtly behaviour?[28] Is Ahab insulting Elijah, or YHWH? If we postulate that the text is inviting us to understand Elijah as having the higher authority, then how are we to interpret the power structure between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel? Surely we are asked to understand this as the underdog mocking the *status quo*. This ambiguity reflects the complexity of this text, but it also invites the reader to reflect on the power relationships, and in this way the text may itself be functioning as an instrument of subversion.

Inversion of Hierarchy and Reversals

Subversion and inversion are of course key components of seriocomic writing, and 'inversion of hierarchy' is one of the important test criteria for the hypothesis. Within this category come instances when an individual of high status is humbled, or the converse; but also the Bakhtinian concept of oxymoronic combinations, such as the virtuous courtesan, or the generous bandit. 'Inversion' is thus seen when a character's status is reversed, or they show the attributes which are the opposite of what one might expect. In a book such as Kings, which has a significant amount of martial activity, we cannot expect to define inversion as a simple defeat in battle; we may, however, find it where the defeated king is emphatically humbled. This category has many examples throughout the central passage, principally focussed in I Kings 20, II Kings 5 and II Kings 6:8–7:20. These are considered in turn below.

I Kings 20

In the battle between the king of Israel and Ben-Hadad we are four times told that it is the נְעָרִים (*na'arim*) of Israel who will lead the offence.

28 If it is a lapse in courtly behaviour, of course, it would provide an excellent example of the transgression of social barriers which is classical of seriocomic literature. The king can curse as well as the next man.

> And Ahab said 'By whom?' And he said, 'Thus says YHWH, by the נְעָרִים of the officials of the provinces. (v. 14)
>
> Then he mustered the נְעָרִים of the officials of the provinces, and they were 232. (v. 15)
>
> The נְעָרִים of the officials of the provinces went out first. (v. 17)
>
> And these went out from the city, the נְעָרִים of the officials of the provinces and the army that followed them. (v. 19)

Who are these נְעָרִים and why do they receive such an emphatic mention? Simon DeVries considers that they were probably a unit of crack troops, 'a special elite guard, composed of young men, normally attached to the various provincial governors' (DeVries, 2003, p. 249). This is problematic, however, as nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible is the word נַעַר clearly used for a military elite.[29]

However, apart from its common uses as servant, or for cases of explicit childhood, נַעַר is often a term of deprecation or low status, linked with the adjective קָטֹן (small), thus:

> And now, O YHWH my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, and I am but a נַעַר קָטֹן, I do not know how to go out or come in. (1. 3:7)
>
> The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a נַעַר קָטֹן shall lead them. (Isa 11:6)

Within our text, Mordechai Cogan argues that the interpretation of נַעַר as 'lads' or some such is more in keeping with the tenor of the narrative, where YHWH gets the glory (Cogan, 2001, p. 465). If he is right, there is a significant *motif* of reversal in this passage, where four times we are told that it is the young men who spearhead the offensive and lead the army of Israel to victory. Alternatively, it is possible that the narrator has allowed deliberate ambiguity

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29 A possible exception is 1 Samuel 25:5, but the meaning here is not explicit. In II Samuel 2:14 it is הַנְּעָרִים who fight for the amusement of Abner and Joab. Roland de Vaux favours 'cadets'; he has identified the use of na'aruna in Egyptian as a military term, possibly for mercenaries (de Vaux, 1961, p. 220).

to remain at this point in the text.[30] While this remains a speculative conclusion, it is perhaps the best explanation for the four-fold repetition of the word נַעַר, which is otherwise unexplained.[31]

II Kings 5

Reversal appears to be an important *motif* in the Naaman narrative, as suggested by Walter Brueggemann (Brueggemann, 2001a, pp. 54ff.). He demonstrates how the passage is set up to highlight the differences between the nameless young girl and the warrior.

The whole of II Kings 5:1 is preoccupied with the attributes of Naaman.

> Now Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram was a great man before his lord and in high favour, for through him YHWH had given victory to Aram. But the man, though a mighty warrior, was a leper.

In contrast, his wife's serving girl is nameless and identified only in relation to others.

> Now the Arameans had been on a raid, and they brought back from the land of Israel a young girl (נַעֲרָה קְטַנָּה), and she served Naaman's wife (v. 2).

In an oxymoronic combination (the wise servant), it is this נַעֲרָה קְטַנָּה who points Naaman in the right direction for help. In contrast, the king of Israel lacks the wisdom to send Naaman to Elisha.

When the great man (אִישׁ גָּדוֹל) Naaman comes up out of the water for the seventh time, it is surely no coincidence that his skin is described as being like the flesh of a young boy (כִּבְשַׂר נַעַר קָטֹן v. 14). By humbling himself to bathe in the Jordan, Naaman has been restored, and is now like the wise girl (נַעֲרָה).

The reversal theme works in the other direction, too. Naaman has been healed through his willingness to submit; Gehazi's disobedience and hubris leads to his own judgment. Brueggemann points out the irony of his words:

> Behold my master has spared Naaman this Aramean by not taking from his hand what he brought. By the living God, I will run after him to get something from him. (v. 20)

---

30 The idea that ambiguity may be within the text *by design* was discussed in the Chapter 1.

31 Repetition of single words has been identified by Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg as an important literary feature which may provide an interpretive key to the text (Alter, 1981, pp. 91–96; Bar-Efrat, 1984, pp. 211–12).

Indeed, Gehazi does 'get something from him'—his leprosy (c.f. Moore, 1990, p. 81).

Thus we have Naaman, the proud Gentile, skilled in battle but unaware of where to obtain help, who humbles himself to receive healing, and becomes like the little girl who advised him. In the process he becomes a God-fearer. By contrast, we first have the little girl, poor in her station as she is minor within the text, but who has the wisdom to advise her master. The second contrast to Naaman is Gehazi, the other נַעַר of the story (v. 20), who, despite being an Israelian insider, lacks the wisdom to obey the prophet, and ends up with Naaman's affliction.

II Kings 6:8–7:20

A satirical interpretation of the blinding of the Aramean troops (II. 6:8–23) has been proposed by Robert LaBarbera (1984). Central to the story of the blinding of the soldiers of Aram is the moment when Elisha and his servant discover that they are surrounded by the army and chariots of Aram. LaBarbera has identified what he terms a chiasm here. Strictly, the elements within a chiasm should be symmetrical rather than reiterative (Overland, 2008), so LaBarbera's structure is more complex than a simple chiasm. His scheme is represented in Figure 4 (adapted from LaBarbera, 1984, p. 641).

FIGURE 4 *The chiasm of II Kings 6:15–17.*

It will be appreciated that text invites us to see the army of YHWH as set against the army of Aram, horse for horse, chariot of fire for chariot. The horses and chariots may be surrounding the city but the horses and chariots of fire are on the hills surrounding *it*.

Thus the battle lines are drawn. But the expected confrontation never takes place, or rather it is bloodless. In a moment which LaBarbera describes as 'ironic, almost comedic' (LaBarbera, 1984, p. 642) the Arameans, struck blind at Elisha's request, willingly follow him to Samaria.

What is this blindness? LaBarbera considers literal blindness but rejects it as a patent nonsense. 'Men just struck blind do not blithely continue on their mission, even in folklore and fairy tales' (LaBarbera, 1984, p. 643). He likewise rejects the notion that the story is a mere absurdity. Instead he offers the suggestion of Anton Jirku; that like the only other biblical use of the word סַנְוֵרִים in Genesis 19:11 it implies a sort of confusion; 'obviously they still think they can see, but their vision does not correspond to reality' (LaBarbera, 1984, p. 643). In English we might say they are 'baffled'; a word which carries the dual sense of visual impediment and confusion.[32]

And the irony deepens. The king has sent the soldiers to 'go, see' where he is (v. 13). But on the contrary, it is Elisha who 'makes them go' (three times, v. 19) and whose prayer eventually causes them to see. LaBarbera also points out the wordplay at work here. At the beginning of the story the Israelians were on their guard (שׁמר) against Aram. Now Aram has been brought to Samaria (שֹׁמְרוֹן).

In this way, as LaBarbera points out, Elisha outmanoeuvres the military institutions of both nations. 'The king of Israel gets military intelligence not from his own organisation, but from the prophet [...] Elisha becomes the ironic leader of the Arameans' (LaBarbera, 1984, p. 645).

The satire is heightened by a number of wordplays. Delivery from the siege will come not through windows (אֲרֻבּוֹת 7:2) as suggested by the scornful adjutant, but through four (אַרְבָּעָה 7:3) lepers, who are—incidentally—excluded by Levitical law from military service. It is through the desertion of these non-combatants that relief will arrive. The Arameans flee because they believe the kings of Egypt (מִצְרַיִם II. 7:6) to be upon them; in actual fact it is just four lepers, (מְצֹרָעִים II. 7:8) (LaBarbera, 1984, p. 649).

II Kings 6:24–7:20 is a narrative which LaBarbera describes as 'close to the common people' (LaBarbera, 1984). He notes the use of slang within the passage, such as 'dove's dung' to describe a chick-pea meal[33] (LaBarbera,

32 I am indebted to Dr. Peter Hatton for this rather nice wordplay.

33 As suggested by the oft-cited 17th century biblical scholar and zoologist Samuel Bochart.

1984, p. 646) and also points out that it is under the feet of the peasants that the arrogant adjutant meets his fate (7:20). He therefore concludes that the text resembles a peasant narrative, folkloric in style, rich in irony, puns and humour, which permits expression of the common disgust towards the ruling class and vents it in the form of ridicule. In sum, LaBarbera considers this to be a satire directed by peasants towards the dominant military elite which governed their lives:

> There is not one military person in the passage, be he soldier, adjutant, or king, who succeeds. Instead it is the prophet Elisha who is victorious [...] Elisha is Joshua, leading his people to victory. Whom does he lead? It is common people, the people who trample the adjutant and plunder the Aramean camp. (LaBarbera, 1984, p. 651)

Although LaBarbera does not refer to Bakhtin's work or the seriocomic genre, his hermeneutic makes it clear that it contains very strong elements supportive of such an understanding.

Building upon LaBarbera's work, Walter Brueggemann (Brueggemann, 1987) has described the central stories of Elijah, Elisha and Micaiah as forming an embarrassing interjection of hurt and amazement which interrupts the 'certitude' of the 'sober, predictable' regnal pronouncements (Brueggemann, 1987, p. 6). These stories, according to Brueggemann, are exceptional because they delegitimise the king and marginalise him in favour of the central prophetic figure. Indeed, Brueggemann's description of the stories sounds quite carnivalesque.

> The narrative playfully probes to see what kind of world might yet exist if the canon of control, the authority of kingship, and subservience to established power are not taken too seriously [...] We watch the construction of an alternative world. (Brueggemann, 1987, p. 8)

Furthermore, in what could be an unacknowledged hint of polyphony, Brueggemann points out that by interjecting their subversive voices into the 'relentless inventory' of the rest of the book, the narratives 'give voice to a very different historical memory, expressed in a very different idiom' (Brueggemann, 1987, p. 7).

Brueggemann's work in this paper is less detailed than LaBarbera's, and builds upon it. His main contribution is to extend LaBarbera's analysis of the purpose of the narrative, from ridicule to subversion. 'The outcome of the narrative is that the royal claims should be *completely nullified* for the lis-

teners of the narrative' (Brueggemann, 1987, p. 1, emphasis mine). Although Brueggemann does not write explicitly of carnival or seriocomic literature,[34] his findings are highly suggestive in that direction.

A scholar who did unambiguously identify carnivalistic features in part of this passage was Stuart Lasine. His paper in 1991 on the arguably related passages I Kings 3 and II Kings 6:24–33 (Lasine, 1991) sparked a somewhat heated exchange of views with Hugh Pyper over the next few years.[35] Part of the discussion throws some light on the purpose and effect of carnivalistic literature in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible, and how it may compare to the related genres of 'world upside down' and parody.

Stuart Lasine began the discussion in his paper *Jehoram and the Cannibal Mothers*. In it he suggested that the counter-instinctive actions of the cannibal mothers of II Kings 6 might be seen as part of the world-upside-down *topos* which in the Hebrew Bible serves to highlight the problem of idolatry (Lasine, 1991, p. 29). Such an association would not be unprecedented: prophetic texts which reference cannibalism often show evidence of other such inversions. Lasine offers the example of Micah 3:2 where graphic images of cannibalism are used figuratively to describe the abusive behaviour of Israel and Judah's leaders, who are described as hating good and loving evil.

Lasine briefly entertains the possibility that the story of the cannibal mothers comprises a satire on the ruling elite of the day, as suggested by other authors such as LaBarbera.[36] However, as Lasine reminds us, it is in fact the mothers who come out in a bad light, and the king who is represented relatively favourably (Lasine, 1991, p. 38). In the inverted world which Lasine sees within the text, the incomparable atrocity committed upon the son is overlooked by the mother seeking redress for a broken promise, a striking element of incongruity that highlights the societal breakdown of the siege. In this context he finds implausible the suggestion of other scholars that the king is being condemned for falling short of Solomon's sagacity; suggesting rather that the king has responded in the only appropriate way, by placing responsibility at the feet of the prophet who might have intervened but has chosen not to. Indeed, Lasine suggests that 'the king acts as the audience's surrogate in the story, prompting reader to witness the narrated events from his perspective and to share his helplessness' (Lasine, 1991, p. 48). The real butt of the passage

34 Although Brueggemann does not refer to Bakhtin in this paper, he shows in a later work that he is aware of his thought (Brueggemann, 1997, p. 83).

35 Lasine, 1991; Pyper, 1993; Lasine, 1993.

36 LaBarbera, 1984. This paper will be considered in detail in the following chapter.

is thus, in Lasine's view, divine justice itself, 'devoid of maternal compassion which punishes the guilty by inverting human nature itself' (Lasine, 1991, p. 29).

Hugh Pyper interacts with this in his paper *Judging the Wisdom of Solomon: The Two-Way Effect of Intertextuality*. Where Lasine has postulated a critique of divine justice, Pyper suggests that II Kings 6 is inviting the reader to go back and reappraise the story of Solomon and the prostitutes (I Kgs 3) in its own light. He proposes that the passage functions not as an inverted-world topos which results in *reversal* but instead like García-Treto's carnivalesque reading of II Kings 9 and 10, which serves to *subvert*, offering a critique of the monarchy in a broader sense, encompassing both kingdoms and more particularly the Davidic line. Pyper suggests that II Kings 6 reveals the flaws of Solomon's reign. Solomon's judicial severity, his foreign wives and consequent dalliance with their gods have resulted in the world we encounter in II Kings 6. 'Far from being a crazy reversal of the normality of Solomon's world, it is the "clear world", the one where the real impulses of human conduct are revealed.' It is 'Solomon's world with the skin off' (Pyper, 1993, pp. 34–35).

Stuart Lasine's somewhat acerbic rebuttal *The Ups and Downs of Monarchical Justice: Solomon and Jehoram in an Intertextual World* is published in the same volume. In it, he considers in detail the purpose of the carnivalesque or world-upside-down writing in II Kings 6.

Whereas Pyper appears to consider that world-upside-down and carnivalesque writings serve different functions—the value-neutral anarchic reversal of normality and subversion-exposure respectively—Lasine argues that both of them can function in either of two ways: either to *subvert* the status quo, or by permitting the episodic venting of aggression and dissatisfaction to facilitate the *continuation* of the status quo. World-upside-down and carnivalesque writing needs to be analysed then, he suggests, not by the notional distinctions of genre, but by its effect; whether it serves to support or subvert the framework of society. With reference to Bakhtin he suggests that such writing need not replace the ruling order with an equal but opposite ruling order, but rather that the use of play challenges the world where polar opposites exist (Lasine, 1993, pp. 47–50). Put simplistically, the target of such writing may either be the ruling class, or the existence of class itself. On the basis of this analysis, Lasine therefore concludes that the II Kings 6 narrative need not subvert the monarchy by its putative connection with I Kings 3; it might equally have an inverting effect.

This discussion is relevant for our purpose as it provides a yardstick against which the analysis of potentially carnivalesque writing needs to be measured; it must be attentive not merely to the genre of the text but also to the putative function of the chosen genre within its original setting. Further, as Lasine has

shown, it should be borne in mind that carnivalesque literature may serve several possible functions, including inversion of the ruling order, and subversion of the status quo. Too rigid an adherence to one or other of these outcomes may prove unnecessarily restrictive in the reading of the text.

This analysis has demonstrated that the central passage has a number of instances where the humble are exalted, the simple are proved wise, and the weak conquer. These are all examples of reversal, subversion and inversion, important seriocomic themes. Related to this is the concept of crowning and decrowning, and it is to this which we now turn.

Royal Robes and Crowning-Decrowning

A cardinal feature, according to Bakhtin, of seriocomic literature, is the crowning-decrowning *motif*. As we have seen, the beginning of the carnival festivities was marked by the crowning of the boy bishop, or of the mock king; at the end he would be displaced from his throne, often with abuse and blows.

Jehu and Jezebel

The extraordinary description of Jezebel's last toilette and then her—very literal—descent to earth with a bump (II. 9:30,33) carry more obvious seriocomic weight. I agree with García-Treto who identifies these as crowning and decrowning events (García-Treto, 1990, p. 54). Jezebel's physical and social elevation (she is upstairs, she does her hair, applies cosmetics and speaks pridefully) serves to maximise the effect of her ignominious death, where these states are abruptly reversed.

In addition, García-Treto suggests *en passant* that the grand cultic assembly which ends in massacre and desecration may also be crowning and decrowning events (García-Treto, 1990, p. 54). Certainly the text emphasises the greatness of the assembly. Jehu sends word to כָּל־נְבִיאֵי הַבַּעַל כָּל־עֹבְדָיו וְכָל־כֹּהֲנָיו (all the prophets of Baal, all his servants and all his priests, II. 10:19). In response, they throng to the temple (10:21)

> וַיִּשְׁלַח יֵהוּא בְּכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיָּבֹאוּ כָּל־עֹבְדֵי הַבַּעַל וְלֹא־נִשְׁאַר אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־בָא וַיָּבֹאוּ בֵּית הַבַּעַל וַיִּמָּלֵא בֵית־הַבַּעַל פֶּה לָפֶה

> So Jehu sent to all Israel and all the servants of Baal came, not a man remained who did not come. And they came to the house of Baal and they filled the house of Baal, end to end.

To pile on the irony, and add to the effect of grandeur, Jehu then clothes all the servants of Baal with festal robes (10:22).

As García-Treto has shown, the ensuing massacre and defilement of the temple contains the seriocomic features of the grotesque, scatology and profanation.

These paired events, marked by the juxtaposition of extreme opposites, amount to a further plausible example of the crowning-decrowning *motif*.

Ahab

Another possible place where this *motif* appears is in 1 Kings 22. Towards the beginning of the chapter the king of Israel is arrayed in splendour:

> The king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were each seated on his throne, dressed in their robes, at the threshing floor at the entrance to the gate of Samaria, and all the prophets were prophesying before them. (1. 22:10)[37]

The robes make another appearance towards the end of the chapter. As they set off to battle, Ahab decides to disguise himself, which involves laying aside his finery:

> And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, '[I will] disguise myself and go into battle. But you, dress in your royal robes.' So the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle. (v. 30)

Why does Jehoshaphat agree to such a suicidal course of action? The question does not appear to trouble commentators, who are generally more concerned with Ahab's motivations than Jehoshaphat's[38] (although Josephus, in *Antiquities of the Jews*, believes that he acquiesces in order to try to disprove Micaiah's prophecy). However, this apparently naïve response of the King of Judah serves an important narrative purpose; he serves not only within the battle, as a decoy; but within the text as a 'stooge'.

After this account of the king of Israel's attempted disguise, there follows quite a detailed account of Ahab's wounding and death, including the propping up of his moribund body in the chariot:

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37 It should be made clear that 'crowning' in the Bakhtinian sense has nothing to do with the genuine coronation or anointing of a king. A king's anointing *may* be an instance of 'crowning', but equally may another incident in his life, as in the example here.

38 E.g. DeVries, 2003, p. 269; Gray, 1970, p. 454; Sweeney, 2007, p. 261; Hochberg & Rosenberg, 1991, p. 230.

> The king was propped up in his war chariot in front of the Arameans, and he died in the evening and the blood of his wounds flowed into the bottom of the chariot. (v. 35)

This would be consistent with the Bakhtinian notion of 'crowning' and 'decrowning', the king establishing himself in magnificence and then taking the downward journey towards ignobility: derobing, being injured, declining to the ignominy of requiring physical support, before finally expiring. One by one the symbols of his authority are stripped away until finally the dogs lick up his blood.

Here then are three possible instances of crowning and decrowning in the central passage. But are they functioning as Bakhtin leads us to expect?

First, crowning, according to Bakhtin, is a functional event, not a substantive one. It confers no essential change upon the person. 'He who is crowned is the antipode of a real king' (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 124). So Ahab may sit in grand state, but he is still being duped (1. 22:21–23). We, the audience, can see right through the charade of cavorting prophets and sycophantic attendants. We know, in fact, that his days are numbered (1. 21:21–22), and we have seen him brutally satirised in previous narratives.

Likewise, Jehu has been anointed by a 'Fool', a 'sorcerer's apprentice' (García-Treto, 1990, p. 55) who has thrust kingship precipitately upon him. And Jehu scarcely deports himself in a regal manner; 'His driving is like the driving of Jehu son of Nimshi; he drives madly' (11. 9:20). His two-chapter reign is characterised by recklessness, haste, non-judicial violence; excess in every regard. He does not execute Jezebel; he has her smashed to pieces. He does not exile the sons of Ahab; he massacres them and piles up their heads. He does not outlaw the priests of Baal; he butchers them and smears excrement over the temple remains. He may have been 'crowned', but there is nothing noble about him.

Finally, Jezebel may coiffure and primp, but she is already on the decline. The power she wielded behind her husband's throne has ended with her husband's death. She is a spent force, and we, the audience, know it.

Secondly, for Bakhtin, the crowning of the carnival king opens the door to previously inconceivable free and familiar contact with the 'monarch' (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 125). So Ahab is bundled into a sitting position as he dies and Jezebel is manhandled out of the window by eunuchs. Even Jehu fails to keep a kingly distance from his subjects after his anointing, returning to the feast or council that he was enjoying with his friends (11. 9:4,11; García-Treto, 1990, p. 58).

Thirdly, disguise, for Bakhtin, is an important part of the crowning-decrowning process. Disguise is 'carnivalistic shifts of clothing and of positions and destinies in life' (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 125). Thus Ahab, robed in splendour

at the point of his 'crowning', assumes a disguise that merely unmasks him as the 'no-king' we already knew him to be. In fact, he is perhaps, ironically, most kingly as he dies, courageously enthroned in his chariot so that his men will not lose heart. This does not lessen the impact of his dethronement; rather the ambiguity is consistent with the seriocomic features that Bakhtin leads us to expect.[39]

Fourthly, decrowning, in Bakhtin, is above all else a means of 'pregnant death'. It is the natural corollary of the crowning event (and did we not see it coming, as Ahab sat in splendour?); and in itself it opens up the possibility of a new crowning (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 125). It is an event of ultimate ambivalence; it tells us 'Ahab (or Jehu, or Jezebel) might wear a crown, but we don't need to give him (or her) any credibility'. How this functions as part of the wider polemic of Kings will be the subject of discussion in chapter 7.

Masking and Foolery

As we saw in chapter 3, masking was identified by Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1984b, pp. 39–40) as a symbol of ambiguity which permits parody, impunity and hence challenges monolithic speech. It is therefore a means of relativism, a threat to conformity, an instrument of transition. It may involve deception or secrecy. A masker is permitted to presume, to encroach, and to assume a pose. Necessarily in Kings we do not find the full medieval form of masking, but we find a number of instances where an individual deliberately cloaks his or her identity or purpose, particularly where this permits a new freedom of speech and behaviour. Central to this idea in Bakhtinian thought is the concept of the Fool.

The Fool

The Fool is a well-known literary trope. For Bakhtin, the Fool is what he terms a 'masker', that is, he exists solely to offer a reflection on others, and possesses the right to tease, hyperbolise and parody. I have not found any discussion in the scholarly literature about the possible existence of Fools in Kings. However, I would argue that a number of possible candidates for 'Fool' exist in the central passage. Some are proposed below.

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39 'All the images of carnival are dualistic; they unite within themselves both poles of change and crisis; birth and death (the image of pregnant death) [. . .] Very characteristic of carnival thinking is paired images, chosen for their contrast (high/low) [. . .] of for their similarity (doubles, twins). Also characteristic is the utilisation of things in reverse: putting clothes on inside out.' (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 126)

Micaiah (*1 Kings 22:1–28*)

Although he never explicitly designates Micaiah a carnival Fool, Walter Moberly in his paper 'Does God Lie to his Prophets? The Story of Micaiah ben Imlah as a Test Case' (Moberly, 2003) investigates how Micaiah uses creative means to speak truth to power.

The king of Israel has already made up his mind to go to war before he decides to consult the self-styled prophets of YHWH (vv. 3–5). They know what he wants to hear, and deliver the message he expects. But Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, spots their sycophancy and requests a second (or rather, 401st) opinion. But the king of Israel[40] is not keen to consult Micaiah, knowing that he is not afraid to tell the king an unfavourable message (v. 8).

As Micaiah arrives, an impressive court scene is revealed to our eyes. The two kings are arrayed in splendour, the court prophets in prophetic frenzy before them (vv. 10–11). Given that the four hundred prophets are about to be unveiled as charlatans, this invites us to 'contemplate the possibility that such a formal and symbolically resonant gathering of religiously responsible leaders may in fact be a sham, an elaborate fraud' (Moberly, 2003, p. 6). Next, we are surprised when Micaiah replies with the same words as the four hundred.

> All the prophets were prophesying thus, 'Go up to Ramoth Gilead and you will succeed, and YHWH will deliver it into the hand of the king'. (v. 12)

> [Micaiah] said to him 'Go up and you will succeed, and YHWH will deliver it into the hand of the king'. (v. 15)

Herein lies a difficulty which many commentators find with the text. Is Micaiah a lying prophet after all? The text does not support this, as Moberly argues credibly. The king's indignation leaves us in little doubt that Micaiah's words are a sarcastic parody of the other prophets' words. And then follows the 'delicious irony' of the king, who only wants his own intentions ratified, taking the moral high ground and demanding the truth (Moberly, 2003, p. 7).

Micaiah tells of the heavenly court scene, and of YHWH's contract with the lying spirit. The lying prophets have been sent by God to dupe Ahab into losing his life. He 'paints a picture of such imaginative starkness that the king must surely be moved by it' (Moberly, 2003, p. 9).

Moberly also notes that Micaiah's reply three times contains the telling word פתה (vv. 20,21,22). The root meaning of the word is 'to be gullible, simple', and its *piel* stem (used here) is often translated 'persuade' (*HALOT*, p. 984).

40 His identity is not confirmed as Ahab until verse 20.

Michael Fox has analysed the use of this word stem in detail, arguing that the פֶּתִי (noun) is not universally culpable, although in the book of Proverbs the term is generally used in a derogatory sense (e.g. Prov 16:29).[41] Elsewhere, however, the פֶּתִי is a naïve simpleton (Fox, 2000, pp. 42–43). Thus Ahab is 'the sort of person who is easily put upon by others' (Moberly, 2003, p. 10). He is unmasked as a 'sucker'.

In creative ways, then, Micaiah confronts the king of Israel with the truth he is unwilling to hear, and addresses the nation to lay bare the folly of the king. Ahab is naively being led to his death by flatterers, and indeed by God himself. Micaiah fulfils the particular role of the Fool almost perfectly. He does not collude with the prevailing logic that the king must be respected, that the battle will be won, or that he should toe the party line with the other prophets. Rather, his words are bold and lack sycophancy, and amount to a subversive swipe at the monarchy of Israel. This assertion of Micaiah's thus amounts to parody and creative truth-telling; classic Fool's discourse. Finally, Micaiah does not have any characterisation in the text beyond his role as that of reflective mirror to Ahab. This, too, is a classic attribute of the Fool.

The Four Lepers (*II Kings 7:3–20*)

Another possible candidate for Fool is the combined entity made up of the four lepers who are the first to discover the flight of the Aramean army. The lepers are a classic example of hierarchical inversion: the non-combatants who gain the victory, the outcasts who save the city, the starving who glut themselves, the powerless who slowly comprehend the power that has fallen into their hands. At the very outset, in stark distinction to the king's despair and machinations, they exhibit in their resignation to death a childlike logic:

> Why are we sitting here until we die? If we say: let us enter the city, famine is in the city and we will die there. And if we stay here we will die. So now let us go and we will fall on the camp of Aram. If they let us live we shall live, and if they kill us we shall die. (II. 7:3b–4)

When they discover the abandoned camp, they demonstrate none of the king's subsequent reticence, and their conduct is uncomplicated by higher matters. There is food, they are hungry, they set to. By their very straightforwardness of

41 Here Moberly's argument would take issue with that of Heim, who has argued that the פֶּתִי in Proverbs refers to the vulnerable youth, with the capacity of being led towards good or evil (Heim, 2013).

purpose they challenge the subtle devices of the authorities. Their precipitate haste is demonstrated by a rapid sequence of verbs:

> They came [. . .] and they came [. . .] and they ate and they drank, and they took [. . .] and they went and they concealed, and they returned and they came [. . .] and they took [. . .] and they went and they concealed. (v. 8)

It is only later that they begin to consider the consequences of their actions and sound the general alarm. They are not permitted to enter the city to break the news, of course, but shout it up to the men on the wall. Eventually the king is roused from bed to take part in the action.

With their clarity of belief and simplicity of action, the lepers manage at the same time to show up the Aramean army as gullible, and the king of Israel and his adjutant as sceptical and faithless. Unlike Micaiah, the lepers in this narrative are not self-consciously provoking or confronting authority, but they serve this function within the text, exposing and unmasking the powers around them, while remaining largely enigmatic themselves.

The Disguised Prophet (*1 Kings 20:35–43*)

Following Ahab's pardoning of Ben-Hadad, an unnamed prophet approaches him in disguise, bloodied and bandaged as though from battle. In fact, he has sought the blows at the hands of a companion. He tells the king a tall story about having allowed a prisoner of war to escape, and the king pronounces sentence on him; like David with Nathan, the sentence rebounds onto himself.

This narrative will be considered more fully in chapter 7, but for now we note that this is probably a good example of foolery, accompanied by the mask of disguise, which permits the man to confront the king with impunity. Fools, we recall, have the right not to make common cause with anyone (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 163): the prophet here is on neither Aram's nor Ahab's side. The Fool in seriocomic writing does not exempt himself from his own scorn; it is consistent with his status that the prophet should seek injury to himself.

His actions uncover the hidden reality of the king's clemency: this is in fact not mercy but disobedience. First, the king has shown compassion towards this gentile 'brother' king, but has no hesitation in harshly declaring judgment on this common soldier from his own land. Secondly, the little drama which is played out before the king traps him into declaring his own judgment.

The prophet has no name; we meet him nowhere else in the narrative. His characterisation is flat, unmarked by detail, except where it serves the narrative. Thus we are given details of his disguise, but not of his fate when the king

became 'sullen and furious'. In this way he is the archetypal Fool, with existence only inasmuch as he relates to others.

Anonymity

A second device which may be related to seriocomic masking is the use of anonymity in the text. Between 1 Kings 16 and 11 Kings 9 there are multiple examples of individuals who carry a significant textual role, but who remain unnamed.

In compiling this list I have included characters that remain anonymous for large portions of the narrative, even if at the very beginning or the very end they are named. Additionally, the list is necessarily somewhat arbitrary, since it depends on the subjective criterion of being 'significant'. Tentatively, then, I offer the following list:

1 Kgs 20: the king of Israel, the prophet
1 Kgs 22: the king of Israel
11 Kgs 1: the king of Samaria
11 Kgs 4: the widow of the prophet, the Shunammite
11 Kgs 5: the king of Aram
11 Kgs 6: the king of Israel, the king of Aram
11 Kgs 9: the anointing prophet.

In some of these cases we might conjecture that the character is designated clearly enough for an ancient readership[42] but in other instances the lack of identifying marker is very striking. As explanation, commentators are often drawn into discussions about historicity[43] or source.[44] Particularly where the anonymity gives way to a later naming of the individual, we might conclude that it arises from source diversity. For example, in 1 Kings 20, the king of Israel is not designated 'Ahab' between verses 15 and 33, and source critics understand this to be because of editorial gloss or source combination (e.g. DeVries, 2003, p. 247). However, with attention to the literary features of the text, it is instructive to consider why the final redactor did not provide an editorial gloss earlier unless he wished the anonymity to function as an artful literary device.

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42 For example, the wife of Jeroboam in 1 Kgs 14. While our modern hackles might rise at the idea that this is an adequate designation for a woman, in the ancient mind it is probably perfectly unexceptionable.

43 E.g. Wray Beal, 2014, pp. 261–63.

44 E.g. DeVries, 2003, p. 269; Sweeney, 2007, p. 306.

Feminist scholar Mary Shields has seen the anonymity of characters such as the Shunammite woman to reveal the underlying patriarchy of the text, and also to amount to a subtle critique (in conjunction with other literary devices) which uncovers the high-handedness of Elisha (Shields, 1993).

Writing in *Semeia* in 1993, Adele Reinhartz considered the role of the anonymous characters in the book of Samuel (Reinhartz, 1993). She concludes that minor characters (the servant, the shield-bearer) play a typified role[45] characterised by, for example, obedience or devotion (p. 126). More important characters function in a similar way to that which we would expect of someone whose name we do not know in real life.

> There is a direct relationship between our ignorance of another's proper name and our tendency to perceive that person solely or primarily as an agent, performing a typified role. (p. 120)

> Unnamed characters function within the narrative as agents and may be understood as analogous to anonymous people in our experience of everyday life. (p. 132)

The idea of the unnamed characters as being emblematic of something greater than themselves (metonymy) has been used by some commentators[46] in their analysis of the 'man of God' and the 'prophet of Bethel' in 1 Kings 13, a narrative which lies outside of the central section, but which may also contain some seriocomic features.

Returning to 1 Kings 20 and 22, where the king of Israel is not named throughout most of the chapters, this idea that he might thus be representational, or archetypal, of all the kings of Israel is striking. I will argue later that both of these chapters amount to a robust insult to the king of Israel. If he were named throughout the text, this affront would be limited in scope. However, by simply designating him as 'the king of Israel', the author is able to smear the character of all the kings of the northern kingdom at once.

However, there may be more still to the device of anonymity. While it is well-established in both common experience and scholarly literature that anonymity of the disparager is a useful cloak to permit impunity (Scott, 1990, pp. 140–52), it also appears that ambiguity around the *object* of the criticism can serve to permit freedom of censure (Scott, 1990, p. 152). Yairah Amit has shown how polemics may be concealed within a text by the judicious use of

45 Cf. Sternberg, 1985, p. 330.

46 Walsh, 1996, p. 185; Wray Beal, 2014, p. 196.

such ambiguity. For example, she argues that Genesis 14 contains many critical allusions to Jerusalem without naming it once (Amit, 2000, p. 157).

So it is possible that the device of anonymity in these texts may serve two, related functions. First, by keeping the designation general, rather than specific, the criticism may be applied more broadly than to a single individual. Secondly, failing to name the character may permit a certain licence in applying the satire. The disapproval may be both wider and more stringent, while permitting a degree of 'deniability'. In short, it might be seen as a useful 'smear tactic'.

Bakhtin's idea of masking, as we have seen, is that it provides impunity for the satirist. It is classically seen in the device of the Fool, who exists not in his own right but to reflect on others (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 163). In seriocomic literature, however, the Fool is not exempt from criticism; the blame cuts in both directions. Thus it is possible that the text may, at times, be setting up its anonymous characters in this role: as a sort of Fool device which functions, at the level of the text (not of the narrative) both to draw and to deflect blame.

Deception

Lying and deceit, while not necessarily seriocomic tropes in themselves, may function within a seriocomic text further to devalue or undermine the *status quo*. We will now consider the use of deceit within the central section of Kings.

Within the central section of Kings I count fourteen separate instances of deceit, dishonesty or duplicity. Some of these cases are by an explicitly 'bad' character, such as Jezebel, but many of them are performed by a 'good' character, sometimes even, apparently, by YHWH himself. The table below shows the details.

Instances of deceit, dishonesty and disguise in the central section

Reference	Perpetrator	Nature of incident
I. 18:4	Obadiah	Illicitly conceals the 100 prophets of YHWH from the king and queen
I. 20:38–40	Unnamed prophet	Disguises himself to entrap the king into speaking his own judgment
I. 21:9	Jezebel and collaborators	False testimony against Naboth
I. 22:15,22–23	Micaiah? YHWH?	Lying spirit from God to entice Ahab to his death
I. 22:29	Kings of Judah and Israel	King of Israel disguised in battle, King of Judah mistaken for him

Reference	Perpetrator	Nature of incident
II. 3:15–19 cf. v. 27	Elisha	Unfulfilled prophecy?
II. 3:22	YHWH?	Visual trick?
II. 5:22, 25	Gehazi	Lies to Naaman and Elisha
II. 6:19	Elisha	Tricks the blinded Aramean soldiers into following him
II. 7:6	YHWH	Deceives Aramean army that an enemy is upon them
II. 8:10,14	Elisha, Hazael	Positive prognosis to a dying king
II. 9:11–12	Jehu	Lies to his fellow officers about his anointing
II. 10:19–25	Jehu	Tricks worshippers of Baal to their doom
II. 11:1–4	Jehosheba	Illicitly conceals the infant Joash

First, we note the sheer volume of such incidents. By comparison, in the rest of Kings there are, at most, five comparable occurrences.[47] Some of the situations in the central section are unproblematic. For Jezebel to lie and manipulate is in character; it does not present us with any ethical dilemmas, nor offer any subversive twist on our understanding of the situation. Similarly, the reader is probably not intended to have anything but a positive response to the illegal and illicit activities of Obadiah and Jehosheba, concealing YHWH's true people from the evil powers that would destroy them. More troubling, to the devout reader at least, are the situations where a prophet of YHWH apparently lies or otherwise deceives. We will consider some of these situations in more detail.[48]

Disguise

We have already considered the use of the disguise *motif* in I Kings 20 and 22, and we noted above that Bakhtin understands disguise to relate to decrowning. Richard Coggins has explored the use of disguise in the Deuteronomistic writing (Coggins, 1997), considering the following: the disguised Saul visiting the witch of Endor in I Samuel 28; the disguising of Jeroboam's wife in I Kings 14;

47 David's broken promise to Shimei (I. 2:8–9); the lying prostitute in II. 3:16–22; the lying prophet of Bethel in I. 13:18 (although, arguably, this passage contains a number of other seriocomic features); Jeroboam's wife disguises herself (I. 14:2); the Rabshakeh claims that Sennecharib has YHWH's mandate in II. 18:25 (for although the wider biblical testimony bears witness to the hand of God behind the Assyrian conquest, it is doubtful that the Assyrians themselves would genuinely acknowledge this).

48 The narrative of Micaiah has been considered above and will not be revisited in detail here.

the disguised prophet in I Kings 20; the disguising of the king of Israel in I Kings 22; the disguising of Josiah in II Chronicles 35:22. He shows that the device is always used at a king's expense, and suggests that it functions to subvert any simplistic theology of *quid pro quo* or the transparency of God's purpose.

> Some modern accounts of Deuteronomistic theology present that theme in very naive terms, as if the realities of every situation could be read off precisely as on a slide-rule[...] What is really going on in any given set of events may in fact be disguised; there may be a deeper level of significance than that which appears on the surface; and the way in which frequent use is made of this disguise theme helps to reinforce that perception. (Coggins, 1997, p. 255)

While he does not develop this intriguing idea further, Coggins' suggestion resonates with Bakhtin's concept of masking. Disguise may be used to reveal what is hidden.

The Unfulfilled Prophecy. II. 3:15–19

This is a narrative which presents considerable problems to interpreters, and has generated a range of responses, although surprisingly, not every commentator notes the discrepancy (e.g. John Gray and T.R. Hobbs, who appear to overlook it). In verses 15–19, Elisha makes the double prediction of water and military victory, with an accompanying description of the havoc which Israel would wreak; overthrowing cities, stopping springs, felling trees[49] and sowing stones on the arable land. This prophecy is partially fulfilled in verses 21–25. However, following the appalling sacrifice by the king of Moab of his own son on the city wall, the Israelians flee because there comes קֶצֶף־גָּדוֹל עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל (a great wrath upon Israel). The nature of this wrath is ambiguous. Did the Moabites rally their courage and rush against Israel with blood-lust? Did Israel respond with fear of the now aroused Chemosh, or sorrow at the idolatrous

49 It is sometimes suggested that this amounts to a breach of the commandment in Deuteronomy 20:19 (e.g. Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 45), but others have argued that it is excluded on the grounds of the original law's intention that there be food provision for the attacking army far from home, which does not apply in this case (Hobbs, 2002, p. 36; Long, 2004, p. 104).

outrage?[50] Is the wrath, perhaps, that of the god Chemosh, or of YHWH?[51] Ultimately, we can only conjecture, but the effect of the wrath is that Israel retreats and the battle is conceded. Thus, despite Israel's initial success, Elisha's prophecy ultimately fails.

Cogan and Tadmor see this arising from a clash between the prophetic tradition and the historical tradition, with the compiling author somewhat unsuccessfully attempting to resolve the issue by reference to 'wrath' (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 51). Marvin Sweeney argues that if קֶצֶף is understood as the sorrow, or regret, of Israel, then their withdrawal would be their own decision and thus not attributable to prophetic failure (Sweeney, 2007, p. 284).

Perhaps the most helpful interpretation is offered by those who take a literary view of the text, particularly Robert Cohn (2000) and Jesse Long (2004). Writing in 2000, Robert Cohn identifies a chiasm within the narrative, which is modified by Jesse Long in 2004. Long shows how the chiasm is structured to surprise us at the end. Figure 5 is adapted from his scheme (Long, 2004, p. 106).

A v.4–5 Mesha rebels

B v.6–8 kings of Israel and Judah agree to fight against Moab

C v.9–12 No water

X v.13–19 Victory oracle

C' v.20–23 Water

B' v.24–25 Israel fights Moab

A' v.26–27 Mesha sacrifices and Israel withdraws

FIGURE 5 *The chiastic structure of II Kings 3:4–27.*

50 Marvin Sweeney argues that קֶצֶף should be translated 'sorrow' (Sweeney, 2007, p. 284), while John Gray suggests that Israel reacts with fear at the likely response of Chemosh to the sacrifice made to him (Gray, 1970, p. 490).

51 Cf. the discussion in Gray, 1970, p. 490.

If the flow of the narrative is followed with attention to the symmetry and the central positioning of the victory oracle, it will become apparent that the reader should be expecting the overthrow of Moab at the end of the passage.

Further, Long demonstrates how the narrative is artfully paralleled with the earlier, Micaiah, narrative of 1 Kings 22, where God is said to trick Ahab into battle and death. Again, the following summary is an adaptation of Long's scheme.

1 Kings 22	**II Kings 3**
vv. 1–4 King of Israel to Jehoshaphat: 'Will you go up?'	vv. 4–8 King of Israel to Jehoshaphat: 'Will you go up?'
'I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses.'	'I am as you are; my people are your people; my horses are your horses.'
vv. 7–8 'Is there a prophet of YHWH?'	vv. 11–12 'Is there a prophet of YHWH?'
vv. 19–23 Micaiah prophecies victory	vv. 16–18 Elisha promises victory
Throne room of heaven, Micaiah reveals YHWH is enticing Ahab to his death	*Missing scene*
vv. 6,12,15 'Into the hand of the king'	v. 18 'Into your hand'
vv. 29–40 Battle report, defeat and death of king	vv. 20–27 Battle report, defeat

As the parallels between the narratives unfold, we are struck by the question, 'Has Elisha also [like Micaiah enticing Ahab] enticed J[]oram to go up in defeat against Mesha of Moab?' (Long, 2004, p. 109). The possibility that YHWH might mean mischief towards the king is further raised by Elisha's use of the word קלל (used in the *niphal*; to be trifling) in v. 18 ('This is a trifling matter in the eyes of YHWH'), a word which was used a few verses previously when he cursed (*hithpael* of קלל) the mocking boys (II. 2.24) (Long, 2004, p. 107). Most pointedly, Joram himself twice expresses the fear that he has been duped toward defeat.

> Alas, YHWH has called these three kings to give them into the hand of Moab (v. 10).
>
> No, for YHWH has called these three kings to give them into the hand of Moab (v. 13).

The reason that Joram suffers defeat but not death, Long argues, is shown by the partial approval which is expressed in verse 2. He was bad, but not as bad as his parents.

This narrative, then, with its partial prophecy and partial defeat, appears to be coherent with the earlier incident between Ahab and Micaiah, with YHWH luring kings to their defeat or death. Nonetheless, as Walter Moberly has shown, this description of events functions in a particular way to rebuke the king, and expose his folly, and given the parallels it may be functioning similarly in II Kings 3.

Visual and Auditory Tricks?

A further puzzle in the same passage concerns the Moabites' misinterpretation of the sun glancing off the pools of water as blood (II. 3:20–23). Is this a simple misunderstanding, or a divine deception? There is little in the passage itself to imply divine deception of the Moabites; the text is pursuing the theme of provision of water: the Israelian army runs out (v. 9); Elisha prophecies pools of water (vv. 16–17); the water which is provision for Israel is snare for Moab (vv. 20–23). Furthermore, the wordplay in the passages does not appear to lead us this way; centring around the assonance of the water flowing from Edom אֱדוֹם (v. 20), meaning 'red'; and the water reflecting red like blood (אֲדָמִים כַּדָּם).[52]

The idea that YHWH might be tricking the Moabites is not addressed by most commentators, although Robert Cohn explicitly rebuts it, 'The Moabites are shown as victims not of direct divine punishment but rather of their own impulsive reasoning' (Cohn, 2000, p. 23). However, a similar incident, II Kings 7, appears on face value to show YHWH deceiving the Arameans.

> YHWH caused the Aramean camp to hear the sound of chariot, the sound of horse, the sound of a great army. (II. 7:6)

On the basis of this mass hallucination, the Aramean army flees. Or is it a hallucination? Perhaps this is the fiery army, horses and chariots of Dothan (II. 6:15).[53] The wording is similar:

(II. 6:15) וְהִנֵּה־חֵיל סוֹבֵב אֶת־הָעִיר וְסוּס וָרָכֶב
(II. 7:6) וַאדֹנָי הִשְׁמִיעַ אֶת־מַחֲנֵה אֲרָם קוֹל רֶכֶב קוֹל סוּס קוֹל חֵיל גָּדוֹל

If so, this is not deceit at all, but a giving to the Arameans of a clearer vision of reality than the Israelians had. Compare this with the prayer of Elisha, who sees the army of YHWH surrounding Dothan (II. 6:17).

52 Cf. Wray Beal, 2014, p. 315.

53 This is the prevailing opinion of commentators, e.g. Cohn, 2000, p. 51; Wray Beal, 2014, p. 353; Sweeney, 2007, p. 313.

> Elisha prayed, 'YHWH, please open his eyes and let him see'. So YHWH opened the lad's eyes, and he saw—behold! The hills were full of horses and chariots of fire surrounding Elisha.

Wisely, then, the Arameans flee—believing they are fleeing a human army, though they have, in fact, perceived the host of heaven. By contrast, the king of Israel, when given a true report of his bloodless victory, fails to believe or act upon it (v. 12).

We will return to this passage in chapter 7, but for now we note that the apparent *motif* of deceit here, on closer inspection, serves to reveal hidden truths. This is Bakhtinian-style masking.

Lying about Ben-Hadad's Recovery

In II Kings 8 the sick Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, sends Hazael to enquire of Elisha about his prognosis. Most translations of verse 10 appear to imply that Elisha urges Hazael to lie to his master.

> And Elisha said to him, 'Go, say to him, 'You shall certainly recover,' but YHWH has shown me that he shall certainly die'. (ESV; NRSV is almost identical)

> Elisha answered, 'Go and say to him, 'You will certainly recover'; but YHWH has revealed to me that he will in fact die'. (NIV 1984; 2011 version is very similar)

> Then Elisha said to him, 'Go, say to him, 'You will surely recover,' but YHWH has shown me that he will certainly die'. (NASB 1995)

C.J. Labuschagne (1965) offers an alternative explanation which initially appears to resolve the issue. Pointing out the lack of the direct speech indicator לֵאמֹר in verse 10, he suggests that this is therefore to be understood as indirect speech, and that חָיֹה תִחְיֶה should refer to Hazael. He links this to the royal proclamation (*vive le roi*) יְחִי הַמֶּלֶךְ (e.g. II Sam 16:16). Thus, he argues, it should read:

> Go and say to him that *you* will surely live, for YHWH has shown me that *he* will surely die.

The problem with this explanation, attractive though it is if we wish to exonerate the prophet, is that Ben-Hadad does not subsequently die of his illness, but is murdered by Hazael (v. 15).

Another possibility is to read the verse according to the *ketiv* rather than the *qere*, rendering it 'do not say you will surely live'.

אֱמָר־לֹא חָיֹה תִחְיֶה (*ketiv*)
אֱמָר לוֹ חָיֹה תִחְיֶה (*qere*)

Others, such as the medieval Jewish commentator RaDaK,[54] suggest that Elisha's words mean that though Ben-Hadad's *disease* is not fatal, he will be assassinated (Rosenberg, 1993, p. 295).

Nevertheless, the problem remains. By whatever means we try to 'spin' the conversation between Elisha and Hazael, Elisha appears to be inciting him to murder his master.[55] However, we must remember that the accession of Hazael has been predicted in 1 Kings 19:15, and is clearly shown to be YHWH's agenda. We should also note that Ben-Hadad's life has already been shown to be forfeit, and in fact, Ahab has been sharply criticised for failing to take it (1. 20:32–43).

The significance of this passage, and the conduct of the prophet, remains somewhat opaque, and we will, for now, simply mark it as difficult and return to it in chapter 5. Nonetheless, it is one more example of deception in what appears to be a substantial number of such instances within the central portion of Kings.

Tricking the Prophets of Baal to their Doom

In 11 Kings 10:18, Jehu uses what Sweeney terms 'blatantly deceptive' means (Sweeney, 2007, p. 338) to lure the prophets of Baal to their death. Of course the lives of idolaters were legally forfeit (Deut 17:2–7), but Jehu's conduct is nonetheless questionable.

His deception is highlighted in the text by the use of homophonic wordplay. Jehu promises to serve (עבד) Baal, but in fact he intends to destroy (אבד) his followers.[56]

This is just the latest in a series of deep ethical flaws revealed in the Yahwist reformer. As T.R. Hobbs says:

54 Rabbi David Kimchi, 1160–1235.

55 The exception is John Gray, who ingeniously suggests that verse 15 refers to someone coming to dampen the mosquito net hanging over the king and discovering that he has died (Gray, 1970, pp. 529–32), but this rather elaborate reconstruction of the text is not found convincing by other commentators (cf. Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 91).

56 Cf. Hobbs, 2002, p. 129.

> Jehu's brutality reaches its lowest point with the massacre of the Baal worshipers (vv. 18–28). Nothing in this story reflects favorably upon Jehu save his zeal. (Hobbs, 2002, p. 132)

Lissa Wray Beal sees in this a textual device to compare Jehu with the later, ideal, reformer, Josiah (Wray Beal, 2014, p. 383). However, it is surprising that the majority of other commentators do not remark on the ethics of the situation, for Jehu is no poster boy for Yahwism. Indeed, the prophet Hosea criticises his bloody purge:

> YHWH said to [Hosea], 'Call his name Jezreel, for in a short time I will visit the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel'. (Hos 1:4)

How the text of Kings wishes us to understand Jehu's actions is ambiguous. In II Kings 10:30 YHWH praises him for his actions against Ahab, but the following verse summarises his reign with less positivity.

> But Jehu did not take care to walk according to the law of YHWH the God of Israel with his whole heart. He did not turn from the sins of Jeroboam which he had caused Israel to sin. (II. 10:31)

This equivocality around the character of Jehu is consistent with the carnivalesque nature of the narrative which García-Treto has already demonstrated.

In summary, this section has considered various aspects of masking in Kings. We have seen how the devices of disguise, lying, trickery and treachery are used plentifully within the narrative, often to reveal another truth about the situation. In addition, even those individuals who appear to be taking YHWH's part do so with the stains of deceit upon their character. These are both key features of the seriocomic genre.

Feasting

In contrast with the formal and hierarchical feasts of officialdom, carnival is characterised by strange feasts, attended by oddly-matched dining companions, and celebrated in the presence of grotesque elements. It celebrates hierarchical inversion, and is itself a transgression of conventions and norms. The 'fast' of solemnity and order is replaced by the riotous feast of carnival. Consideration of the central section through a seriocomic lens reveals that it abounds with such feasts.

The Drunken King

In 1 Kings 20, the king of Aram is portrayed as drinking himself into insensibility on the eve of battle:[57]

> When he heard this word—while he and the kings were drinking in the booths—he said to his servants 'Take your positions'. So they took their positions against the city. (v. 12)

The attack comes from Israel at midday while Ben-Hadad is still getting drunk:

> They set out at noon, while Ben-Hadad was drinking himself drunk in the booths, he and the thirty-two kings helping him. (v. 16)

And then, in what may be the only biblical instance of the direct reporting of inebriated speech,[58] Ben-Hadad appears to have lost capacity entirely.

> He said 'If they have come out for peace, seize them alive; if they have come out for battle, seize them alive'. (v. 18)

The king's drunken speech is overlooked by many scholars[59] but has been identified by some, including Jonathan Robker[60] and the medieval rabbi Arbarbanel (Hochberg & Rosenberg, 1991, pp. 208–9). The narrative will be considered in more detail in chapter 7.

Death in the Pot and Multiplication of Bread

The enigmatic pericope of 'Death in the Pot' (II 4:38–41) may be another instance of a strange feast; this one comprising a meal around a poisoned stew. There has been speculation around the botanic classification and pharmacological properties of the gourds comprising the stew, and of the curative herb which Elisha applies (Gray, 1970, pp. 499–500), but this is surely not the point of the passage. Like the narrative which follows it, the marvellous multiplication of bread (II. 4:42–44), it must be intended to demonstrate the power of the

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57 This *motif* of drunkenness in 1 Kgs 20 has also been identified by Jonathan Robker (2011).

58 In a thorough survey, Sheldon Seller lists almost 70 effects of alcohol described by the Hebrew Bible; drunken speech is not among them (Seller, 1985).

59 Sweeney, 2007; Cogan, 2001; Gray, 1970; Montgomery, 1951, p. 323.

60 'There are no other biblical examples of two protases having an (essentially) identical apodosis,' (Robker, 2011, p. 652 c.f. DeVries, 2003, p. 248; Walsh, 1996, p. 301).

prophet. Inasmuch as both of these miracles consist of a meal where a lack of feasting was anticipated, they add to the cumulative weight of evidence for 'strange feasts' within the central part of Kings.

Aram and Israel

II Kings 6 contains the account of a very odd feast, shared by the king and court of Israel, and his enemies, the soldiers of Aram. The 'host' is Elisha, sought by Aram and little loved by Ahab.

> And he said to him, 'Do not slay them. Did you capture with your sword or your bow those whom you are about to slay? Put food and water before them so they can eat and drink and let them go to their lord.' So he gave a feast for them, a great feast, and they ate and drank and he sent them and they went to their master. (vv. 22–23)

This would appear to be a clear instance of carnivalistic mésalliance: enemies who were just a few minutes ago thirsting for one another's blood are now passing around the wine goblet and sharing a 'great feast'. It has been suggested that this takes place in order to increase the fame of the man of God (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 75), or that this is an example of clemency as advised in Proverbs 25:11 (if your enemy is hungry give him bread to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.).[61] Whatever the political or ethical considerations of Elisha and the king of Israel, the feast is unexpected and striking.

The Cannibals and the Lepers

Two odd feasts are reported in II Kings 6:24–7:20. The scene is besieged Samaria. First, we read of two women who have been devouring their own children, in the most macabre feast of all. This is not even the frenzy of the utterly starving, for they take the time to cook the boy:

> This woman said to me, 'Give me your son and we will eat him today and my son we will eat tomorrow'. So we boiled my son and we ate him. Then I said to her the following day, 'Give me your son and we will eat him'. But she has concealed her son. (vv. 28–29)

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61 Knut Heim, 2014, verbal communication; c.f. Gray, 1970, p. 513, who considers this to be diplomatically shrewd clemency.

Then, enforced fasting is replaced by feasting as the Aramean siege is miraculously lifted. Previously, the (non-cannibalistic) residents of Samaria have been eating donkey's heads and dove's dung (6:25). When the lepers discover that the camp of Aram is deserted, they indulge in an unexpected and illicit midnight feast:

> And these lepers came to the edge of the camp and they came to one tent and they ate and drank, and they took from there silver and gold and clothes. And they went and hid them, and returned and came to another tent and looted it and went and hid it. (7:8)

We are not explicitly told of the feast which the relieved residents of Samaria enjoy, but the closing scene of the mob stampeding to the camp, trampling people *en route*, invites us to imagine the feast that follows. It does not seem likely to have been decorous.

Feasting over Jezebel's Body

In his analysis of II Kings 9, García-Treto has highlighted the strange feast of Jehu as the dogs are eating Jezebel: 'Jehu goes in to eat and drink, to feast, that is, to fill his belly, quite literally over Jezebel's dead body, which concurrently is transformed into excreta' (García-Treto, 1990, p. 58). The image of the dogs gorging themselves in the street, while the king is stuffing himself inside the palace, is very powerful.

Unexpected, Excessive and Grotesque

Each of these feasts is in some way unexpected. They should not have been taking place at all, because it is an inappropriate (or surprising) time, an inappropriate menu, or inappropriate company. They are, as it were, replacing the 'fast' that might have been expected.

Most of the feasts carry a flavour of excess about them. Ben-Hadad is clearly portrayed as getting drunk; the feast for the Arameans is a 'great feast':

> So he prepared a feast for them: a great feast. And they ate and drank. (II. 6:23)

As we have seen above, the actions of the lepers as they feast have an air of voracity about them, demonstrated by a long, urgent string of finite verbs. Likewise, the townspeople stampeding to the spoil trample the officer in their way.

Two of the feasts are also frankly grotesque: the feast of Jehu and the cannibal mothers. Use of the grotesque is the subject of the next section.

Transgression of Bodily Barriers and the Grotesque

One of the criteria in Stallybrass's 'tentative morphology' is the transgression of bodily barriers: that is, put simplistically, what should be 'in' is 'out' of the body, and vice versa. Thus, for example, this category would include bloodshed (especially if described in a particularly gruesome way), and the loss of bowel contents. This is closely related to the grotesque, which Bakhtin defines as the grandiosity of what is carnal; the lowering of all that is elevated and the elevation of all that is debased (Bakhtin, 1984b, pp. 19ff.). Hence scatological elements of the text belong in this category, too.

We have already seen that Francisco García-Treto has identified many grotesque elements in II Kings 9 and 10: Jezebel's body turning to dung on the plot at Jezreel (9:37) and her blood spattering the walls like urine (9:33, c.f. v. 8); the seventy heads in baskets (10:7) and the murder of the Baal priests still in their festal robes (10:22–25), the befouling of the temple of Baal (10:27).

The central passage has an exceptionally high bodycount. The violent deaths between I Kings 16:15 (the beginning of the Omride dynasty) and II Kings 11 (the consequences of Jehu's purge against the Omrides) are set out in the table below.

Violent deaths in the central passage

Reference	Nature of death	Name of victim(s)	Number of victims
I. 16:18	Suicide by fire	Zimri, king of Israel	1
I. 16:34	Human sacrifice?[62]	Abiram, Segub, Bethelites	2
I. 18:40	Slaughter	Prophets of Baal	450
I. 20	Battle deaths	Arameans	'Heavy losses' (v. 21) + 100,000 (v. 29)
I. 20:30	Crushed by collapse of a wall	Arameans	27,000
I. 20:36	Mauled by a lion	Prophet of God	1
I. 21:13	Illegal stoning	Naboth, true Israelite	1
I. 22.37	Arrow wound, exsanguination	Ahab, king of Israel	1
II. 1:10, 12	Consumed by fire from heaven	Soldiers of Israel	50×2

62 Cf. Montgomery, 1951, pp. 287–88; Gray, 1970, p. 370.

Reference	Nature of death	Name of victim(s)	Number of victims
II. 2:24	Mauled by bears	Bethelite youths	42
II. 3:24	Battle deaths	Moabite	Unspecified
II. 3:27	Human sacrifice	Son of king of Moab	1
II. 6:28–29	Cannibalism	Lad of Samaria	1
II. 7:17	Trampled to death	Officer of king of Israel	1
II. 8:15	Murder by suffocation/coup	Ben-Hadad, king of Aram	1
II. 9:24,27	Political assassination/coup	Joram, king of Israel Ahaziah, king of Judah	2
II. 9:30–37	Thrown from a window, trampled by horses, eaten by dogs	Jezebel, queen of Israel	1
II. 10:7	Slaughter and decapitation	Ahab's sons	70
II. 10:11	Slaughter	Family, friends, advisors and priests of Ahab in Jezreel	Unspecified; 'no survivor'
II. 10:14	Slaughter	Family of Ahaziah	42
II. 10:17	Slaughter	Family of Ahab in Jezreel	Unspecified; 'all'
II. 10:25	Slaughter in the temple of Baal	Priests of Baal	Unspecified; 'all'
II. 11:1	Slaughter	Royal family of Ahaziah	Unspecified
I. 11:16	Execution/coup	Athaliah	1

It will be seen that we have burnings, beheadings, cannibalism, human sacrifice, animal mauling, crushings, mutilations and a stoning. It rather reads like a murderers' source book, with enough carnage to rival even Rabelais. How many of these incidents individually amount to the grotesque is unclear, but taken *en masse* they certainly have a cumulative effect akin to it. There is blood by the bathload; it is at times hyperbolic[63] and fantastical in scope and intensity.

63 For example the 100,000 foot soldiers slaughtered and the 27,000 crushed by a wall in I. 20:29–30. Commentators as diverse in approach as Simon DeVries and Jerome Walsh agree that these numbers are stylised or exaggerated (DeVries, 2003, p. 250; Walsh, 1996, p. 306).

Profanation of the Sacred

It will readily be seen by now that the categories for identification of the seriocomic genre are necessarily blurred, with significant overlap between them. We have already considered abusive speech and grotesque action; closely related to this is the idea of the profanation of the sacred.

Francisco García-Treto has identified this *motif* in the Jehu account, where the temple inner sanctum is invaded, the priests of Baal are slaughtered within the temple, and the temple itself is torn down and used for a latrine.

> Now Jehu had stationed 80 men outside, and he said: the man who permits anyone to escape from the men I have given into your hand, his life shall be for his life. So it happened: at the conclusion of the burnt offering, Jehu said to the royal guard and officers: Come, kill them. Not one man is to escape. So they killed them with the edge of the sword. The guards and officers threw them out, then they entered the citadel of the house of Baal. Then they brought the pillar out of the house of Baal and they burned it. So they tore down the pillar and they tore down the house of Baal, and they established it as a latrine to this day. (II. 10:24–27)

It is striking that in the other main confrontation with Baal, at Mount Carmel (I. 18), there are none of the other elements of profanation apart from the slaughter of the priests. In particular, there is no record of the destruction or defilement of the altar. I do not find any other convincing evidence for the profanation *motif* in the central passage.

The other textbook example of defilement in Kings occurs in the account of the Josianic reforms in II Kings 23, well outside the central section which I am arguing is seriocomic. This narrative records the reading of the law, the renewal of the covenant, the cleansing of the Temple, and then the systematic destruction and desecration of the high places (vv. 5,8,9,13,15,19) and the idolatrous shrines of Baal (vv. 4,5), Asherah (vv. 4,6,7,15), Molech (v. 10), and Chemosh (v. 13). However, there is little else to suggest that this narrative is seriocomic; it lacks any element of the grotesque, the scatological, of hierarchical inversion, of masking or fantasticality. The tone of the passage is sombre, systematic and measured. There is slaughter of some of the priests (v. 20), but the majority of Josiah's attention is upon the objects of idolatry (e.g. v. 11). Even the ambiguous verses which may or may not refer to executions (vv. 5,8)[64] are strikingly different from the robust language of Jehu's massacres. Josiah is the

64 For example, John Gray and Robert Cohn do not believe these verses refer to execution (Gray, 1970, p. 734; Cohn, 2000, p. 157) whereas Wray Beal considers that the text is ambiguous on the matter (Wray Beal, 2014, p. 507).

scourge of Judah, but unlike the reforms of Jehu, this is no carnival. The lack of elements of profanation in the central section of Kings will receive further consideration in chapter 5.

Fantasticality

Bakhtin claims that the most important characteristic of seriocomic writing is 'its bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic', with complete freedom of plot and invention (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 114). This is not a feature which has been greatly explored by other scholars looking at seriocomic features in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible. David Valeta comments on fantastic elements in the Daniel story, particularly 'fantastic type scenes such as the fiery furnace incident, the transformation of the king into a wild beast, the writing on the wall and the lion's den' (Valeta, 2005, p. 314) and the presence of 'fluid conceptions of time' (Valeta, 2005, p. 318). Craig, however, does not explicitly find any such elements in Esther (Craig, 1995); nor does García-Treto in his work on the Jehu narratives (García-Treto, 1990).

That the Elijah-Elisha narratives are a compendium of florid miracle stories is beyond doubt. In contrast to the sobriety of much of the remainder of Kings, the central section abounds with extraordinary events. This explosion of supernatural activity has been a source of scholarly speculation. John Gray, for instance, suggests that the more abstruse Elijah/Elisha miracles are interjected into other prophetic material which is of 'real historical value', 'solely on grounds of contemporaneity'. Thus he considers the narratives of the prophets' involvement in the affairs of state (e.g. 1 Kgs 18; 11. 8:7–15) to be of historical value, while the miracles of the axe head and the widow's oil, for instance, are trivial and 'indicate an authority of little discrimination' (Gray, 1970, pp. 29–30).

Outside the Elijah/Elisha narratives, there are very few miraculous incidents in Kings. 1 Kings 13 has the dramatic splitting of the altar, with the shrivelling of the king's hand, and the odd behaviour of the lion which kills but does not eat the man of God. 11 Kings 20 has the shadow retreating up the steps to verify that Hezekiah will be healed.

Within the central section, however, we find the following list of supernatural events:

1. 17: 1–7	'No rain except at my word'
1. 17:6	Elijah fed by ravens
1. 17: 8–16	Multiplication of oil and flour
1. 17: 17–24	Revivification of the widow's son
1. 18:38	Fire from heaven
1. 18:46	Elijah outruns Ahab's chariot
1. 19:6–8	Elijah fed by an angel

I. 19:11–13	Theophany on Horeb
II. 1:1–15	Fire from heaven
II. 2:8	Parting of the Jordan
II. 2:1–14	Translation of Elijah, horses and chariot of fire
II. 2:14	Parting of the Jordan
II. 2:21	Healing of the water
II. 2:23–25	Mauling of 42 youths by bears
II. 4:5–6	Multiplication of oil
II. 4:17	Miraculous birth
II. 4:32–35	Revivification of Shunammite's son
II. 4:41	Healing of the pot
II. 4:42–44	Multiplication of loaves
II. 5	Naaman healed, Gehazi smitten with leprosy
II. 6:6–7	Axe head floats
II. 6:8–20	Blind eyes see, seeing eyes blind, horses and chariots of fire
II. 7:7	Arameans defeated by divine auditory illusion

Additionally, in a narrative which marks the end of the Elijah-Elisha narratives and the focus upon Aram, Elisha's bones revivify the corpse of a man (II. 13:21).

It is noteworthy that many of the miracles in this central section are like no others in the Hebrew Bible. Kings contains the only incidents of revivification in the Hebrew Bible,[65] and the translation of Elijah[66] and the other incident with the horses and chariots of fire[67] are unique. While not entirely unprecedented,[68] the two occasions where an animal or animals act at the bidding of YHWH or his prophet are striking. Elijah is fed by ravens (I. 17:1–7), and bears punish mocking boys (II. 2:23–25).

Opinions vary as to the literary function of these extraordinary events. While many (e.g. DeVries, 1978, pp. 54–56; Sweeney, 2007, pp. 295–97; Gray, 1970, p. 466) consider that their purpose is to legitimise the prophet and/or his God in the eyes of the reader, I shall argue in chapter 5 that their effect is considerably more ambiguous than this. For now, it is sufficient to note that there can be little doubt that they are intended to astonish the reader by relating events which fall altogether out of his normal experience. On this basis, therefore, I designate them 'fantastical', which is consistent with Bakhtin's description.

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65 I. 17:17–24; II. 4:18–37; II. 13:21.

66 II. 2:11.

67 II. 6:17.

68 Cf Jonah's fish, Balaam's ass.

We have therefore found evidence within the central section of Kings for the following seriocomic features: violation of linguistic norms, inversion and subversion of hierarchies, masking, strange feasts, transgression of bodily boundaries and grotesque events, profanation, and fantasticality. An important check to this proposal is to determine whether these features are also found in such abundance in the remainder of Kings, and in its parallel text, Chronicles.

Comparison with Similar Passages in the Rest of Kings

We have already seen in this chapter that there are very few miracle narratives within the rest of the book of Kings, and that the linguistic diversity within the central part of Kings is largely distinct from the rest of the book. Additionally, I have demonstrated that there are five instances of lying and deceit in the outer portions of the book, compared with fourteen between the rise of the house of Omri in 1 Kings 16:15 and the death of Elisha and Hazael in 11 Kings 13. Further, we have seen that the Josianic reform (11 Kgs 23) differs considerably in style compared to that of Jehu (11 Kgs 9,10).

In this section, I will briefly compare the style of narration in the central section with comparable passages in the rest of the book. The obvious examples to examine are the accounts of the murder or assassination of a king or queen, and the accounts of the wholesale massacre of a royal family. The following tables display these accounts side by side.

Violent death of kings and queens in Kings

Outside the central section	Within the central section
1. 15:27–8 Nadab of Israel Baasha son of Ahija of the house of Isaachar conspired against him, and Baasha smote him at Gibbethon of the Philistines, for Nadab and all Israel were besieging Gibbethon. So Baasha killed him in the third year of Asa king of Judah and he became king in his stead.	**1. 16:9b–10a Elah of Israel** He was in Tirzah, drinking himself drunk at the house of Arza, who was over the house in Tirzah. And Zimri came in and smote him and killed him.
11. 11:14b–16 Athaliah Athaliah tore her clothes and cried out, 'Treason! Treason!' And Jehoida the priest ordered the commanders of the hundreds, appointed to the army, saying	**1. 16:18 Zimri of Israel** When Zimri saw that the city was taken, he came into the palace citadel, and he burned the palace around himself with fire, and he died.

Outside the central section

to them, 'Bring her out between the ranks and slay with the sword anyone who follows her'. For the priest had said, 'Do not kill her in the house of YHWH'. So they laid hands on her and she came to the entrance of the horses to the palace and there she was executed.

II. 14:19 Amaziah of Judah

They conspired against him in Jerusalem and he fled to Lachish, and they sent after him to Lachish and they killed him there.

II. 15:14 Shallum of Israel

Then Menahem, son of Gadi came up from Tirzah, and he came to Samaria and he smote Shallum son of Jabesh and killed him, and he reigned in his stead.

II. 15:25–6 Pekahiah of Israel

Pekah, son of Remaliah, his charioteer, conspired against him and smote him in the citadel of the palace in Samaria, along with Argob and Arieh, and fifty men of the sons of Gilead. And he killed him and he reigned in his place.

II. 15:30 Pekah of Israel

Hoshea son of Elah conspired against Pekah son of Remaliah, and he smote him and killed him and reigned in his place.

II. 16:9 Rezin of Aram

The king of Assyria listen to [Ahaz] and the king of Assyria came up against Damascus and seized her and he deported her to Kir. And he slew Rezin.

Within the central section

I. 22:34–35,37–38 Ahab of Israel

But a certain man drew his bow by chance and he struck the king of Israel between the soldering and the coat of armour. And he said to his charioteer: Turn your hand and bring me from the front, for I am seriously wounded. The battle grew fierce that day and the king was propped up in his war chariot in front of the Arameans, and at evening he died. The blood of his wound flowed into the bottom of the chariot [. . .] And the king died and he was brought to Samaria and they buried the king in Samaria. And they washed it in the chariot in the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood, and the prostitutes washed in it, according to the word of YHWH which he had spoken.

II. 8:14–15 Ben-Hadad of Aram

So he left Elisha, and he came to his master. And he said to him, 'What did Elisha say to you?' He said, 'He told me you will live'. But in the morning he took a cloth and dipped it in water, and spread it on his face, and he died. So Hazael reigned in his stead.

II. 9:23–25 Joram of Israel

Joram turned his hand and he fled, saying to Ahaziah, 'Treason, Ahaziah!' And Jehu took his bow in his hand and smote Joram between the shoulders, and the arrow went through his heart, and he fell to his knees in his chariot. He said to his officer Bidgar, 'Lift him up and throw him out onto the plot of land, the field belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite'.

Outside the central section

II. 19:37 Sennacherib of Assyria

As he was bowing in the house of his god Nisroch, Adrammelech and Sharezer struck him with the sword and fled to the land of Ararat. Eser-haddon his son reigned in his stead.

II. 21:23 Amon of Judah

The servants of Amon conspired against him and killed the king in his house.

II. 23:29 Josiah of Judah

In his day, Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt went up to the king of Assyria at the Euphrates River. And King Josiah came to meet him and he slew him at Meggido when he saw him.

Within the central section

II. 9:27–28 Ahaziah of Judah

When Ahaziah king of Judah saw this, he fled on the road to Beth-haggan. Jehu followed him, saying 'Him too!' So he struck him in the chariot at the ascent of Gur which is in Iblaim. And he fled to Meggido and died there.

II. 9:32–37 Jezebel

Jehu lifted up his face to the window and said, 'Who is with me? Who?' Two or three eunuchs looked down at him. He said, 'Throw it[69] down'. So they threw her down and her blood spattered on the wall, and on the horses, and they trampled her. Then he came in to eat and drink, and said, 'See to that accursed woman and bury her, for she was a king's daughter'. But when they went to bury her, they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. They came back and told him, and he said, 'This is the word of YHWH which he spoke by the hand of Elijah the Tishbite, "On the field of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung on the field of Jezreel, so they cannot say 'This is Jezebel'".'

Royal family massacres in Kings

Outside the central section

I. 15:29 Massacre of the house of Jeroboam, king of Israel

When he became king, he smote the whole house of Jeroboam. He did not leave anyone breathing to Jeroboam, until he had destroyed it.

Within the central section

I. 16:11 Massacre of the house of Baasha, king of Israel

When he became king, as soon as he was enthroned, he smote the whole house of Baasha; he did not leave him any that urinate against a wall, of his kindred, or his friends.

69 *ketiv* has masculine pronimal suffix; *qere*: 'her'.

Outside the central section

II. 11:1 Massacre in Judah of the house of Ahaziah, king of Judah

When Athaliah, mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the royal family.

Within the central section

II. 10:6–8 Massacre of the house of Ahab, king of Israel

When the letter came to them they took the king's sons, and they killed 70 men and put their heads in baskets and sent them to him at Jezreel. When the messenger came and told him, 'They have brought the heads of the kings sons,' he said 'Put them in two heaps at the entrance of the gate until the morning'.

II. 10:13–14 Massacre in Israel of the house of Ahaziah, king of Judah

When Jehu met the brothers of Ahaziah, king of Judah, he said, 'Who are you?' They said, 'We are the brothers of Ahaziah, and we have come up in peace, the sons of the king and the sons of the queen'. He said, 'Take them into custody alive'. So they took them into custody alive and he slew them at the well of Beth-Eked, 42 men, and he did not spare one man among them.

It will readily be appreciated that the accounts within the central section are generally more florid, graphic and detailed than are their equivalents within the remainder of the book. Thus, for example, the killing of Amaziah of Judah (II. 14:19) occupies only eleven words. By contrast, within the central section, the death of Joram of Israel (II. 9:23–25) is described in detail. Jehu draws his bow, hits him between the shoulders, the arrow pierces his heart; Joram cries out in alarm and slumps to his knees before dying.

Similarly, the account of the massacre of the house of Jeroboam (I. 15:29) is terse:

> When [Baasha] became king, he smote the whole house of Jeroboam. He did not leave anyone breathing to Jeroboam, until he had destroyed it.

By comparison, within the central section, Jehu's annihilation of the house of Ahab (II. 10:6–8) is explicit:

> When the letter came to them they took the king's sons, and they killed 70 men and put their heads in baskets and sent them to him at Jezreel. When the messenger came and told him, 'They have brought the heads of the kings sons,' he said 'Put them in two heaps at the entrance of the gate until the morning'.

This is consistent with the comments made above that the central section has not just a high body-count, but a large diversity of modes of death, often described quite graphically.

There are some anomalies; the account of Athaliah's massacre of the house of Ahaziah (II Kgs 11) is remarkably bland, whereas the account of her own murder a few verses later is more florid.

The exact limits of the central section have not yet been tightly defined. It seems to begin with the appearance of Elijah; it concludes at or near the death of Elisha. In fact, Elisha disappears from the text for at least two and a half chapters[70] before he briefly returns for his death scene (II. 13:14–20). Seriocomic events also appear to lull in these chapters, before returning briefly with Elisha's death. At this point in the text occurs the fantastical situation where the victories of Jehoash are linked to the number of times that he strikes the ground with the arrows (v. 19); and the revivification of the man on contact with Elisha's bones (v. 21). Thus it may be that the proper conclusion of the central section should be the death of Elisha in II Kings 13. This will be considered in more detail in Chapter 6.

In order to represent visually the clustering of seriocomic features which I have observed, I have constructed a graph, by counting the number of possible seriocomic features within each chapter of I and II Kings. It will be evident that there are a number of limitations inherent within this approach.

First, it will be seen that there may be significant cross-over between the seriocomic categories: decrowning is an instance of reversal, which may in turn be closely linked with oxymoronic associations, and so on. In this graph I have attempted to tease out the different strands within a particular narrative, without introducing bias by counting the same event twice, unless it contains distinct features which appear to warrant it. Naturally this is a subjective venture.

Secondly, as will be evident to the reader, the chapter divisions are arbitrary, but as a convenient way of dividing the text into approximately similar-length portions it seems the easiest way to analyse the book on the 'macro' level. Any

70 Elisha is absent from II Kings 11, 12 and the first half of 13; he is not present in chapter 10, either, but Jehu's purge is cast in terms of the fulfilment of Elijah's prophecy (II. 10:17).

additional divisions of the text into, for example, self-contained textual units, could potentially introduce additional bias into the investigation.

Thirdly, I have omitted from the graph the 'northernisms' identified by Gary Rendsburg and discussed on page 72. This is because the numbers of 'northernisms' that Rendsburg is identifying per chapter (upwards of 15 at times) will obscure the other features (often two or three per chapter). It will be seen that the appearance of the graph below bears considerable similarity to the graph of Rendsburg's findings shown in figure 1 on page 72. Linguistic transgression remains on this graph, however, as the use of curses and billingsgate has been counted.

A graph constructed from subjective data in this way is thus a blunt instrument, but nonetheless may help to demonstrate visually a trend within a text. The graph is shown in Figure 6.

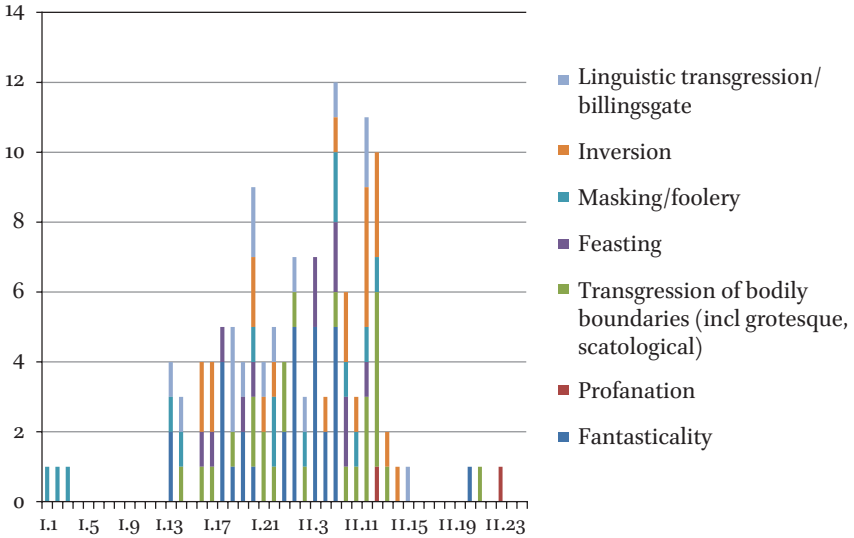

FIGURE 6 *Seriocomic events in Kings, by chapter.*

Despite the ambiguity over the exact limits of the central section, it can be seen that the general tendency is that the typically laconic[71] style of the biblical narrator is disrupted in the central section with an eruption of florid features, consistent with the seriocomic genre as described by Mikhail Bakhtin.

71 C.f. Alter, 1981, p. 196.

Comparison with Parallel Passages in Chronicles

A second important check to the thesis outlined above is to determine whether passages in the central section which have parallels in Chronicles are more seriocomic in their Kings version. A final-form-critical reading of Kings would presuppose that any parallel passages in Chronicles are unlikely to share the seriocomic features, since the author had different priorities.

It is generally held that the Chronicler had access either to the text of Kings or to a precursor text (Japhet, 1993, pp. 16–17; Klein, 2006, p. 30; Braun, 1986, p. xxiii). It is striking that most of the texts within the central passage of Kings do not have a parallel within Chronicles, presumably because of the chronicler's pronounced Judaean preoccupation.[72] In particular Elisha does not appear at all in Chronicles, and Elijah has just a cameo appearance in II. 21:12.[73]

The main place of overlap between the central section of Kings and the book of Chronicles is the death of Ahab as described in in I Kings 22:29–40 and II Chronicles 18:28–34.

The two passages are almost identical with mainly a few very minor grammatical changes and spelling variants. There are three substantial differences; the first two do not appear to be relevant.

First, in I Kings 22:31 the king goes into battle with 32 chariot commanders; in Chronicles the number is not specified (II Chronicles 18:30).

Secondly, in Chronicles, YHWH comes to the aid of Jehoshaphat's cry:

> When the chariot commanders saw Jehoshaphat they said: He is the king of Israel. And they turned upon him to fight him and Jehoshaphat cried out and YHWH helped him and God urged them away from him. (II Chronicles 18:31)

By contrast, in Kings, God is not seen to respond to Jehoshaphat's cry.

> When the chariot commanders saw Jehoshaphat they said: Surely he is the King of Israel. And they turned upon him to fight him and Jehoshaphat cried out. (I. 22:32)

72 Japhet, 1993, p. 17.

73 It is, however, striking that this single appearance by Elijah in Chronicles results in Jehoram, king Judah, suffering a disease of his bowels, resulting in their total herniation outside his body.

However, the most striking difference between the two texts occurs at the end of the section, in I Kings 22:35–38, where Kings has several verses which are not in Chronicles. The two texts are set out below, with the differences highlighted.

I Kgs 22:35–38
The battle grew fierce that day and the king was propped up in his war chariot facing the Arameans. And at evening he died and the blood of his wound flowed into the bottom of the chariot. At the setting of the sun a cry went through the camp: Every man to his city and every man to his land! So the king died. And they brought him to Samaria and they buried the king in Samaria. And they washed the chariot in the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood and the prostitutes washed in it according to the word of YHWH which he had spoken.

II Chron 18:34
The battle grew fierce that day and the king of Israel was propping himself up in his chariot facing the Arameans until evening. And at sunset he died.

It will be seen that within two passages which are otherwise extremely similar, the verses which are unique to Kings are rich in grotesque imagery: the blood flowing into the bottom of the chariot and clotting there; the dogs licking up the blood; and the prostitutes washing in it.

This provides further evidence to support the proposal that this central passage in Kings is peculiarly rich in seriocomic elements.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the central passage for seriocomic themes, and found evidence for a large number of them. The findings are supported by the work of LaBarbera and Brueggemann, who have found elements of subversive satire in some of the Aram narratives; by Pyper and Lasine, who have found subversion and inversion in the grotesque story of the cannibal mothers, and by García-Treto, who has explicitly sought, and found, carnivalistic features in the Jehu narrative. My proposal is further supported by a comparison of the central narratives with equivalent passages from the remainder of Kings,

which reveals that the central narratives contain a much more dense clustering of seriocomic elements. Further, a textual comparison between Kings and Chronicles shows that elements previously identified as seriocomic within the Kings account are absent in Chronicles.

It could be suggested, however, that the central section shows distinct features purely because of its different original sources. This question will be considered in more detail in chapter 8. However, some preliminary comments may be helpful at this point.

It is likely that the Elijah/Elisha narratives and the Aram cycle originate from different sources than much of the remainder of Kings. Additional evidence for this is provided by the linguistic analysis by Rendsburg and others, who have provided ample data to suggest that the central section is either of 'foreign' (that is, non-Judaean) origin, or have been deliberately 'foreignised'—probably a combination of the two.

Since the central section is probably from a different source, this may provide an *aetiological* explanation for the seriocomic features in the text—how they arose. Indeed, this is more than likely. It does not, however, offer any explanation of the *purpose* for their presence, presuming that the text represents the skilful handiwork of an intelligent redactor, who was entirely at liberty to smooth, edit, and shape the final form as he saw fit.

This chapter has examined my proposal with regard to the first and fourth test criteria which I established in chapter 3; that is, the clustering of features diagnostic of the seriocomic genre, and the concurrence of my findings with other scholarly opinion. The function of the next chapters is to test the proposal against the second and third criteria: coherence of purpose and explanation of otherwise problematic texts. In order to do this, we need to consider the *function* that the seriocomic narratives are serving. First, we will consider their function in subverting the reader's attitude to the prophets.

CHAPTER 5

Anti-prophetic Rhetoric

> 'Mr. Darcy is not to be laughed at!' cried Elizabeth. 'That is an uncommon advantage, and uncommon I hope it will continue, for it would be a great loss to me to have many such acquaintance. I dearly love a laugh.'
>
> 'Miss Bingley,' said he, 'has given me credit for more than can be. The wisest and the best of men—nay, the wisest and best of their actions—may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke.'
>
> 'Certainly,' replied Elizabeth—'there are such people, but I hope I am not one of them. I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can. But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without'.
>
> AUSTEN, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813, pp. 62–63

In the previous chapter I have shown, by demonstrating a multiplicity of 'distinctive features'[1] of the seriocomic genre, that the 'cumulative evidence' criterion is satisfied. I will now attempt to address the question of the function of this genre within the narrative. This chapter will consider how the seriocomic features of the Elijah-Elisha narratives throw some misgivings upon their role as ideal prophets of YHWH. It will also consider the work of other scholars who have identified similar themes which support my hypothesis.

In *Prophet against prophet*, Simon DeVries categorises the prophet stories into subgenres, according to their supposed function within the text. Thus he identifies 'power-demonstration narratives', 'prophet legitimation narratives', 'prophetic call narratives', and so on. Strikingly, he considers that the overwhelming effect of such narratives is to endorse the prophet: to bolster his reputation, applaud his power, and so on (DeVries, Prophet against Prophet, 1978). This approving assessment of the prophets in Kings is shared by other commentators: T.R. Hobbs, for example, refers to the actions of Elisha with the Shunammite as exemplifying Christ-like tenderness (Hobbs, 2002, p. 55);

1 These terms are set out by Joel Kaminsky (2000) and Paul Lauter (1964), and used by Yairah Amit (2000): see chapter 3 for a fuller discussion.

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Mordecai Cogan sees the ursine massacre as establishing the power and authority of Elijah's successor (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 39). Unease with such positive interpretations is growing, however. In recent years a number of scholarly reassessments of the prophetic role within Kings have emerged; some of these are germane to our seriocomic reading of the book and we will consider them shortly.

I shall argue that, far from being represented as unerring bearers of the divine word, the prophets play a far more ambiguous role in the text. They introduce a sort of playful riot, a rumbustious revelry to the narrative. It is they who present several of the insults found within the text (e.g. I. 18:27; 21:20; II. 3:13–14), and whose dramatic revelry strikes such a contrast with the stiff pomp of, for example, Solomon.[2] It is they who introduce the 'fantastical' element to the text, turning the world of 'royal certitude' (Brueggemann, 1987, p. 11) into one where events are unpredictable, where the dead don't stay put and the living might be consumed by fire.

The Prophets of Baal

We shall examine the textual handling of prophets within the central section of Kings, beginning with the pagan prophets who meet their fate on Mount Carmel. As the people gather on the mountain, Elijah challenges them:

> עַד־מָתַי אַתֶּם פֹּסְחִים עַל־שְׁתֵּי הַסְּעִפִּים אִם־יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים לְכוּ אַחֲרָיו וְאִם־הַבַּעַל לְכוּ אַחֲרָיו

> How long will you limp between two crutches? If YHWH is God, go after him, but if Baal, go after him. (I. 18:21)

The meaning of the expression פֹּסְחִים עַל־שְׁתֵּי הַסְּעִפִּים has been discussed in many commentaries, and few fail to note that the verb פסח (here *qal*) occurs again, this time in the *piel*, a few lines later:

> וַיְפַסְּחוּ עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה

> And [the prophets of Baal] limped around the altar they had made. (v. 26)

2 Cf., for example, Brueggemann, 2001b, p. 37.

The standard explanation of these words,[3] that Elijah is criticising the people's indecision between YHWH and Baal, is undoubtedly correct, but it fails to note the satirical quality of the narrative at this point. Likewise, many Bible translations lessen the rhetorical impact of Elijah's mocking words:

> How long will you waver between two opinions? (NIV)
> How long will you go limping between two different opinions? (ESV)
> How long will you hesitate between two opinions? (NASB)

A very literal, and graphic, alternative is offered by Mordechai Cogan, 'How long will you keep hopping between the two boughs?' (Cogan, 2001, p. 435). סְעִיף can be translated 'crutches', but is derived from סָעִיף, meaning bough or twig; the word carries with it the inherent memory of its root סעף to split or divide (*HALOT*, p. 762; Burney, 1903, p. 223).

Thus the text appears to suggest that the people are shifting from foot to foot in indecision, as if unevenly shod, while the later description of the prophets of Baal is anything but complimentary. They are portrayed as hobbling (פסח, v. 26) around the altar and ineffectually calling on a god who will never answer.

Meanwhile, Elijah, to extend the metaphor, is getting into his stride.

> Call in a louder voice, for he is a god! Perhaps he is meditating; perhaps he has withdrawn to the side; perhaps he is on a journey; perhaps he is asleep and must be woken. (v. 27)

We saw in the previous chapter that this amounts to a fierce, probably scatological, insult aimed towards the prophets of Baal and their god.

As Elijah mocks, the attempts by the prophets of Baal become ever more frantic. Now they are gashing themselves, and working themselves up into a fury, represented by the word וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ, the *hithpael* of נבא. In the *hithpael* stem, the word refers to a prophetic frenzy, such as that exhibited by Saul in 1 Samuel 18:10, or the itinerant prophets in 1 Samuel 10:5. It is generally used in the critical sense, as a marker of false prophecy (Adam, 2009).[4]

In quiet contrast to the crescendo of passion in verses 28–29a is the stark representation of the result. The utter silence from the god is skilfully rendered in the text, although its rhetorical force does not translate well into English:

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3 E.g. Gray, 1970, pp. 396–97; Cogan, 2001, pp. 439–40; DeVries, 2003, p. 228.

4 The Mari documents (dating from c2300 to 1760 BCE) name a number of court *muḫḫûms*, ecstatics, related to the Hebrew מִתְנַבְּאִים (Malamat, 1989, pp. 85–86).

וְאֵין קוֹל וְאֵין עֹנֶה But there was no sound and no-one answering. (v. 26)

וְאֵין־קוֹל וְאֵין־עֹנֶה וְאֵין קָשֶׁב But there was no sound and no-one answering and no hearing. (v. 29)

The mockery of the pagan prophets by Elijah is no novel interpretation; it makes its way into Sunday school lessons across the world. But when we look for anti-prophetic elements within the central section, we must first note the obvious: before Elijah utterly routs the prophets of Baal, the text, through direct speech and narration, utterly humiliates them.

False Prophets of YHWH

The Micaiah narrative (1. 22:1–40) serves primarily as a strong critique against Ahab, as we have seen in the previous chapter,[5] but the role of the 400 prophets within the narrative is also important. The king of Israel[6] and Jehoshaphat of Judah are seeking divine assurance about a forthcoming battle. To this end they have summoned 400 prophets of YHWH. This in itself is an interesting comment about the availability of the prophets to the king, and hence, by inference, their complicity with him. One wonders whether Micaiah either does not know about the summons (because he does not live in the king's pocket) or if he has been excluded from it (in which case we infer that he is not one of the king's pet prophets). Indeed, such speculations are rapidly confirmed, as the king of Israel declares:

I hate him for he does not prophesy good for me but evil. (v. 8)

Micaiah is eventually summoned, although the caution relayed to him by the messenger is met with scorn:

'Behold, now, the words of the prophets are unanimously favourable toward the king. May your words be as the word of one of them, and speak favourably.'

But Micaiah said 'As YHWH lives! Whatever YHWH says to me, that will I speak.' (vv. 13–14)

5 Cf. Moberly, 2003.

6 The king of Israel is not designated by name until verse 39.

As we await the arrival of the reluctant prophet, reluctantly summoned by the king, the 400 court prophets are portrayed as fanatically eager to please the king. They have already with one mouth (פֶּה־אֶחָד, v. 13, see v. 6) endorsed his proposed actions, now they are in a prophetic frenzy (v. 10) and one, Zedekiah, appears to be charging around with a pair of iron horns on his head (v. 11).

If the subsequent story vindicated the words of the prophets, this might be considered an impressive scene; enacted prophecy like this is typical of the prophetic ministries of true prophets such as Ezekiel and Jeremiah.[7] But the words of the 400 are about to be denounced, as the reader deduces from the unfolding of the narrative, so the details of their prophetic frenzy serve to highlight the irony. We might have thought them carnival Fools. But they fail to speak truth to power; they fail to decline partiality; and so they become their own parody. In Bakhtinian terms, this is a typical example of satire against the puppets of the state. The 400 are shown to be prophets-for-hire, prostituting themselves to the king in ludicrous fashion.[8]

Elijah

We turn now to the massive figure of Elijah, the greatest prophetic figure in the central section, and one of the most significant in all of biblical narrative.[9] Clearly his hirsute appearance (II. 1:8) is distinctive enough for the mere description to identify him; perhaps the text is inviting us to imagine him as shaggy and unkempt. As we read through a Bakhtinian lens this description might alert us to the possibility that he will take a seriocomic role within the narrative. If this is the case, the weight that Elijah bears within the text will suggest that what we learn from such a reading is very significant.

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7 E.g. Ezekiel 4, Jeremiah 13.

8 This would compare closely with the accepted role of the prophet in other Ancient Near Eastern contexts. For example, the Mari documents suggest that prophecy in Mari was generally favoured towards the king, aiming to placate him or endorse his actions. Thus, the text of one such prophecy delivered to Zimri-Lin of Mari in the context of deteriorating relations with Babylon, reads: 'O Babylon! Why doest thou ever [evil]? I will gather thee into a new [. . .] The houses of the seven confederates and all their possessions I shall deliver into Zimri-Lin's hands'. (Malamat, 1989, pp. 88–89)

9 The significance of Elijah in Jewish thought to the present day relates to the Malachi prophecy of the return of Elijah in advance of the Messiah (Mal. 3:23, MT), and is evidenced by the role he plays at the Passover Feast, where a fifth coup of wine is poured for him, and a seat may be left vacant.

We have seen the use of rhetorical irony by Elijah against the prophets of Baal. Less well-established, however, is the way that the narrative serves to undermine Elijah himself.[10] In fact, though, the Elijah narrative contains a number of ambiguities. Great as he is, the prophet is not without his faults.

Elijah's Self-pity?

The standard reading of the Horeb episode is that Elijah is suffering from post-climactic exhaustion and is ministered to by the angel of YHWH before his next challenge.[11] Undoubtedly this so; however, there are additionally a number of indicators within the text which suggest that Elijah's actions are more questionable.

First, Elijah has arrived in the desert on his own initiative, or rather, because of the word of Jezebel (I. 19:2). Elsewhere (unlike Elisha, as we shall see), he is very responsive to the word of YHWH. Thus God commands, and Elijah goes: to Kerith (I. 17:3–5); to Zarephath (I. 17:9–10), to see Ahab (I. 18:1–2), to Damascus (I. 19:15–19) to Naboth's vineyard (I. 21:17–18), to meet the messengers from Samaria (II. 1.3–4), and then, at last, on his multi-staged final journey (II. 2:2,4,6). In his flight to Horeb, however, he appears to deviate from his mission, allowing Jezebel's threat to propel him to run away (Gregory, 1990, p. 109).[12] This is further highlighted by the divine question which comes to him on Horeb: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

Second, we consider the interaction between Elijah and Obadiah in I Kings 18. Obadiah starts in verses 3–6 as a somewhat ambivalent figure (Walsh, 1996, p. 239). By the nature of his role as royal steward, he is situated squarely within the court of Ahab, so his loyalties are naturally under suspicion. We are, however, given additional information about his clandestine activities, concealing one hundred prophets of YHWH from Jezebel. Elijah's terse command to go and tell Ahab his location unleashes a torrential reply from the other man, described by Robert Alter as 'grim comedy' (Alter, 1981, p. 73). Obadiah's argument does not need to be so lengthy for plot purposes; he is simply afraid that Elijah will be spirited away before Ahab gets to the place, and that he will pay the price. But his reply employs the following linguistic features: a rhetorical question (v. 9), an oath formula (v. 10a), hyperbole (v. 10b), the double

10 For example, R.P. Carroll sees a few elements of humour in the Elijah-Elisha narratives, but concludes 'The tales are humorous, the prophets are not. Humour in that sense is not to be found among the prophets, though it is to be found in the telling of stories *about* them'. (Carroll, 1990, p. 177)

11 E.g. Brueggemann, 2000, pp. 234–35.

12 Cf. Carlson, 1969, pp. 432–33.

repetition of Elijah's instructions (vv. 11, 14), a pessimistic prediction with a rhetorical flourish (v. 12a), a rapid sequence of verbs (v. 12b), self-justification containing another rhetorical question and a string of assonance (וְאֶבַלְכְּלֵם לֶחֶם) (vv. 12c–13), and an almost anticlimactical conclusion, whose very simplicity provides the rhetorical climax of the prophet's impassioned plea (v. 14b).

Scholars sometimes overlook the dramatic effect of this discourse, paying attention instead to its three-fold construction, or the way it delays the action.[13] But our attention should be alerted by this 'frantic monologue' (Walsh, 1996, p. 242), which is rapid, breathless, full of redundancy and hyperbole, comprising ninety-five words set between Elijah's laconic six word greeting and instruction and his cool ten word reply. Robert Alter describes this as 'contrastive dialogue', dramatizing the difference in character between the speakers (Alter, 1981, p. 73). Obadiah may be audacious when it comes to the pinch, but in the presence of a sympathetic listener, his daring melts away into querulousness. Our admiration for his faithful courage has been roused in the opening verses of the chapter, but after his complaint, despite our sympathy for his predicament, he has become a figure of mild foolishness.

Obviously this passage has a narrative role in showing the desperate situation for the prophets of YHWH within the court of Ahab and Jezebel. But this does not fully account for the style of delivery, the verbosity and the petulance, for the characterization which this otherwise minor figure receives within the narrative. An explanation which more fully accounts for the style of the speech, rather than just its content, is to see this passage as a reflection of the Horeb episode (II Kgs 19).

Russell Gregory has noted some of the parallels between the two passages, arguing that they form an ironic mirror of one another, enclosing the Carmel narrative between them. Obadiah supplies the hidden prophets with bread (לֶחֶם) and water (18:4); Elijah is fed with bread (עֻגַת) and water (19:6). God is referred to in both passages as YHWH *of hosts* צְבָאוֹת (18:15; 19:10,14), a designation that is only used one other time in Kings[14] (Gregory, 1990, p. 112).

The *motif* of prophets hiding within a cave frames the Carmel pericope. At the beginning, Obadiah commits a 'courageous act of compassion' by sheltering the hundred prophets of YHWH in the face of Jezebel's murderous intent. At the end of the section, however, Elijah is found sheltering in a cave as a result of a 'cowardly pilgrimage' in response to Jezebel's threat to his own life. 'The courage and faithfulness of Yahweh's servant who ministered to these hunted prophets judge the conceit and fearfulness—or faithlessness—of Elijah' (Gregory, 1990, pp. 112–13).

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13 See, for example, Nelson, 1987, p. 115; Brueggemann, 2000, p. 221.

14 II. 3:14.

Further, Elijah's miserable analysis of the situation, with the emphatic אֲנִי לְבַדִּי , 'I remain, I alone, and they are seeking my life, to take it' (1. 19:10–14) is ironically undermined in the reader's eyes by the earlier revelation—not just to the reader, but to Elijah himself (1. 18:13)—of the continuing existence of Obadiah's hundred prophets, and then by YHWH's subsequent revelation that 7000 faithful worshippers remain. Elijah may feel utterly alone, but he is not, and he should know it: this is sheer self-pity.

Brave yet timid, competent yet peevish, Obadiah displays his own inadequacies, but they appear to function within the larger text to highlight those of Elijah. Bold as Elijah's reply to him is, his own courage melts away in a similar fashion just a few verses later. Obadiah is revealed as weak, timid, and unstable, and in so seeming, he holds the mirror to Elijah to point out *his* weakness, timidity and instability.

Elijah's Hubris?

Further, Elijah's actions on Carmel have been called into question. Gregory considers them to be a sign of Elijah exceeding his mandate, for the instruction to present himself to Ahab (1. 18:1) can hardly be understood to authorise the challenge which Elijah utters.

> No doubt, Yahweh carries the day following the prayer of Elijah [...] but the suspicion of manipulation [...] lingers. (Gregory, 1990, p. 104)

This may not be the first time that Elijah has overstepped the mark. His very first words, in 1 Kings 17:1, sound rather arrogant:

> By the living YHWH, the God of Israel before whom I stand, there will not be dew or rain these years except at *my word*.

The later story of Honi the Circle Drawer in the Babylonian Talmud is reminiscent of this. In Ta'anit 3:9–10, we are told how, in response to a winter drought, the rabbi Honi drew a circle on the ground and told God 'I swear by your great name—I'm simply not moving from here until you take pity on your children!' (translated by Jacob Neusner, 2011, pp. vol. 7a, p. 96). When a slight rain began, he commanded God 'this is not what I wanted', at which point a deluge started. Still not satisfied, he rebuked God again with the same words; then, finally, the downpour moderated and it rained 'the right way'. On account of this presumption, Honi was considered by the rabbi Simeon ben Shatah to have escaped excommunication only because of the greatness of his reputation.

In similar fashion, then, Elijah appears to be commanding God rather than responding to the command of God. Just as Honi is considered to have acted

presumptuously, so Elijah's actions smack of audacity. Although the medieval rabbis would never have overtly criticised him, the slightest hint of discomfort at Elijah's words is expressed by Redak, who appears to emphasise the prophet's autonomy in the matter.

> Elijah, in his zeal, proclaimed that there would be no rain or dew except at his bidding. Since Ahab had surpassed all his predecessors in wickedness, he made this proclamation, perhaps he and his people would be driven to repent. He knew that G-d would support him as He had done for Samuel, who decreed that it would rain during the wheat harvest. Elijah intended to have the rain and the dew withheld until all the people, or at least part of the people would repent. (Redak, quoted in Hochberg & Rosenberg, 1991, p. 177)

Russell Gregory says that here Elijah 'exchanges his prophetic commission for an egotistical challenge' (Gregory, 1990, p. 103). Gregory summarises Elijah thus, 'Elijah exhibited all the attributes of a mighty prophet, but certain inconsistencies subverted this image, and this led to a truer picture of this important prophet' (Gregory, 1990, p. 150).

Indeed, following Elijah's declaration of drought at the beginning of chapter 18, the remainder of the chapter appears to portray God working to preserve life in spite of Elijah's pronouncement. Thus the widow of Zarephath and her son both receive miraculous interventions; indeed, even Elijah himself appears to need supernatural sustenance, having been hoisted on his own petard, as it were (1. 18:2–9).

This reading of Elijah's character is clearly at variance with the standard assessment of him as exemplary prophet. However, it seems to me that a careful reading of the text with an eye to satire suggests that certain elements of the text hint at such a subversive interpretation. As we would expect, the destabilising reading does not lie at the surface of the text, but is concealed from the casual reader. This is consistent with Yairah Amit's understanding of polemics veiled because of their controversial nature, yet whose effect is comparable to that of 'fine rain, whose accumulated drops create a suitable background and preparatory framework for the reader's discovery of the subject' (Amit, 2003, p. 97).

However, it is the characterisation of Elisha which throws all of this into sharper relief. Here, I differ substantially from Russell Gregory's conclusion that Elijah 'begins to recede in the shadow of his successor who strives to serve Yahweh so that Israel moves even closer to the service of Yahweh' (Gregory, 1990, p. 152). As the following paragraphs will argue, I consider that Elisha is

portrayed far less positively that his predecessor. In Bakhtinian style, we will now bring the characterisation of the two prophets into dialogue with one another.

Elisha

The Word of YHWH and the Prophet

As we have seen, Elijah is generally characterised as implicitly obedient to God, who moves the prophet at his command, usually indicated by the formula, 'The word of YHWH came to him/Elijah'. Elisha is very different. With regard to his travels, he is his own man. On his own authority he goes to the bank of the Jordan (II. 2:13), to Jericho (v. 18), to Bethel (v. 23), to Carmel and Samaria (v. 25), to Shunem (4:8), to Gilgal (4:38), into Dothan and then out of it (6:13–15) and to Damascus (8:7). Nowhere do we see Elisha responding, as Elijah did, to a divine imperative to relocate.

Further, when Elijah performs his miracles, they are always done with explicit reference to YHWH. Thus, for example:

> For thus says YHWH God of Israel: the pitcher of flour shall not come to an end and the jug of oil shall not decrease until the day YHWH gives rain upon the face of the land. (I. 17:14)

By contrast, in the Elisha narratives YHWH is neither invoked nor credited for six out of thirteen miracles:[15] the miracle of oil (4:1–7); the miraculous birth (4:15); the healing of the stew (4:41); the healing of Naaman (5:10); Elisha's supernatural knowledge about and cursing of Gehazi (5:25–27); the floating of the axe head (6:6–7).[16]

Two of the miracles are more troubling yet, for the prophet appears first to try the miracle through his own power, and only then to invoke the power

15 The seven miraculous occasions when Elisha does credit YHWH are: the parting of the Jordan (II. 2:14); the healing of the water (II. 2:21); the cursing of the boys (II. 2:24); the water-into-blood deception—if we are to read this as Elisha's miraculous action rather than his prophetic word (II. 3:14–23); the revivification of the Shunammite's son (II. 4:32); the feeding of a hundred (II. 4:42–44); and the opening and closing the eyes of Gehazi and the Arameans (II. 6:17,18,20)

16 This dichotomy does not appear to be due to the diversity of style of different sources; most of the miracles are placed into the same category by source scholars: stories of the individual Elisha as opposed to those of the public, historical figure (Gray, 1970, pp. 465ff.).

of YHWH. First, Yairah Amit has noted that in the story of Elisha and the Shunammite, his initial self-confidence in sending Gehazi with his staff to raise the dead child is followed by an the embarrassing failure of this measure which drives him to prayer (II. 4:29–35, Amit, 2003, p. 289).

There may be an earlier example of the same phenomenon. One possible translation of II. 2:14 describes Elisha attempting to part the Jordan without reference to YHWH in the first instance:

> He took the cloak of Elijah which had fallen from him, and he struck the water. Then he said 'Where is YHWH, the God of Elijah?' Then when he, too, struck the water it divided—here and here—and Elisha crossed over.[17]

Amit concludes that Elisha's initial failure to raise the Shunammite's son functions as a lesson for Elisha, who 'learns something about himself'. The larger context does not invite us to draw such a happy conclusion, however. Following the raising of the Shunammite's son, Elisha again acts without consulting or invoking YHWH on a further four occasions: the healing of the stew (4:41); the healing of Naaman (5:10); the supernatural knowledge about and cursing of Gehazi (5:25–27); and the floating of the axe head (6:6–7). There is no evidence that Elisha has learned his lesson, although the reader may well have taken the point.

This omission of reference to 'the word of YHWH' passes largely without remark by most commentators,[18] although T.R. Hobbs notes that the word of YHWH only occurs at the very end of II Kings 4, and even then is not given undue prominence (Hobbs, 2002, p. 54). However, the phenomenon has been noted by Wesley Bergen, in *Elisha and the End of Prophetism.* He has commented on the replacement within the text of the expected 'word of YHWH' by the 'word of Elisha' (Bergen W., 1999, p. 44). In the Elijah narratives, the word of

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17 This interpretation of events has been described by Robert Cohn in his commentary on II Kings (Cohn, 2000, p. 15). A more typical translation would read: 'He struck the water, saying: Where is YHWH, the God of Elijah, even he?' However, this inference depends on the allocation of אַף־הוּא to the end of the preceding utterance, rather than the beginning of the following narration, an interpretive decision which requires the accentuation to be altered (Burney, 1903, p. 266), that is, moving the athnach from אֱלֹהֵי to הוּא. This is in accordance with the practice of the LXX. The LXX, however, fails to translate אַף־הוּא but merely transliterates it to αφφω, as a proper noun. Some commentators deduce that this should therefore read אִיפֹה ('where?') e.g. Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 31.

18 It is not pointed out by Gray, 1970; Cogan & Tadmor, 1988; Sweeney, 2007, nor do the ancient commentators appear to have noted it (Rosenberg, 1993).

YHWH is referred to seventeen times,[19] and the word of the prophet just twice.[20] By comparison, in the Elisha narratives, the word of YHWH occurs four times[21] and the word of the prophet on seven occasions.[22] Thus, for example, we read:

> [Naaman] went down and plunged into the Jordan seven times according to the word of the man of God. (II. 5:14)

As Bergen sardonically suggests, 'It may raise in the mind of the reader a certain doubt regarding the relationship between Elisha's word and YHWH's' (Bergen W., 1999, p. 44).

Another example of this might found be in the way that Elisha responds to Naaman's dilemma about how he should conduct himself within the temple of Rimmon (II. 5:18–19). Without any apparent deference to the will or the word of YHWH, Elisha gives a definitive word to Naaman, reassuring him about his anticipated cultic infidelity. This appears to fly in the face of the Deuteronomic attitude to idolatry. Is Elisha arrogating the authority of YHWH to himself?

The confusion between the prophet's words and YHWH's words becomes starker yet in the incident of the blinding of the Arameans (II. 6:8–23). Here, the miraculous event is portrayed as having taken place through prayer, indeed Elisha's words are respectful פְּקַח־נָא and הַךְ־נָא (please open, and please strike).[23] But then, however, the narrator tells us:

> So [YHWH] struck them with blindness *according to the word of Elisha*. (v. 18)

We are accustomed to read that prophets act כִּדְבַר יְהוָה (according to the word of YHWH, e.g. I. 17:5). Here, however, there is an unexpected inversion of the formula. YHWH acts כִּדְבַר אֱלִישָׁע (according to the word of Elisha). This is surely intended to be deeply unsettling to the reader. As Bergen comments:

> The result is not a prophet who is directly discredited in the minds of readers, but one which makes readers uncomfortable with this prophet in particular, and prophetism in general. (Bergen W., 1999, p. 67)

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19 I. 17:2,5,8,16; 18:1,36; 19:9; 21:17,28; 22:38; II. 1:17; 9:26,36; 10:10,17.

20 I. 17:1,15.

21 II. 3:12; 4:44; 7:1,16.

22 II. 2:22; 4:17; 5:13,14; 6:18; 7:17; 8:2.

23 T.R. Hobbs points out that only here in II. 6:17,18 and in II. 4:33 does Elisha explicitly pray (Hobbs, 2002, p. 77).

Finally, Bergen has pointed out the intriguing transference of the messenger role from Elisha to Gehazi.

> In much of Genesis–2 Kings, the prophet acts as a messenger to bring the word of YHWH to its final recipient. Messages travel from God through prophet to target [...] In the Elisha stories, however, the messenger role is taken up by Gehazi or others. If Gehazi takes the role of messenger/prophet, this leaves for Elisha the role of God. (Bergen W., 1999, p. 44)

There is much in these texts to lessen our appreciation for Elisha.

The Magic of the Man of God?

We have already suggested that the florid and unexpected miraculous actions of Elisha are 'fantastical' in the seriocomic sense. What is their role within the narrative?

They do not all have a clear purpose. While the restoration of the axe head would be significant to the individual who loaned it, the main effect of the miracle seems primarily intended to bolster the reputation of the prophet (both within the narrative and within the text). If the effect was to endorse the prophet so that his words might be seen to be those of YHWH, we might understand this as valuable. If the narrative clearly indicated that Elisha always gave the glory to YHWH, the reader might see the miracle as important. However, Elisha never speaks against Baalism, and the miracle is not clearly attributed to the power of God. The same could be said for other miracles, too. We will shortly consider the perhaps dubious nature of the miraculous birth of the Shunammite's son, which also occurs without reference to YHWH.

It is often stated that many of the actions of Elisha are suggestive of sympathetic magic.[24] H. Wheeler Robinson has described the principles on which such a magic is based. This belief is that 'like produces like, and that an act performed in one place may be causally reproduced in another' (Wheeler Robinson, 1927, p. 2). Thus mimetic magic is coercive; it causes the god to match the action performed by the prophet. Vestiges of this magic appear to reside in the actions of the later prophets, where the ancient form of the action is given a religious meaning with a 'higher outlook' (Wheeler Robinson, 1927, p. 5). Writing much later, J. Lindblom broadened the distinction between prophetic action and coercive magic.

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24 E.g. Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 58; Gray, 1970, p. 498; Hobbs, 2002, p. 76; for a contrary view, see DeVries, 2003, p. 221.

> The power of the magical action was dependent on the inner power connected with them and their performance in accordance with definite magical laws; the power of the prophetic actions like the power of the prophetic word was derived from Yahweh's will. The prophetic actions were never directed to occasional and merely personal ends, but always served the main end of the activity of the prophets, the fulfilment of Yahweh's plans and purposes. (Lindblom, 1962, p. 172)

While it might seem to a modern reader that the use of magic should be offensive to a devout Yahwist, in the ancient world the dichotomy is not nearly so clear. It appears that in these ancient texts the use of magic was in itself tolerable, provided it is clearly attributable to YHWH. As A. Jeffers says of the miracles of Elijah and Elisha:

> There is no reason for the Deuteronomistic Historian to suppress instances of magic and divination; indeed, they are freely and constructively used to affirm and confirm Yahweh's power and reinforce or establish the institution of prophecy (as against that of the kings). Both Elijah and Elisha are presented as Moses-like figures whose function is to defend the covenant and maintain the Torah of Yahweh against a people who stubbornly fight his will. (Jeffers, 2005, p. 672)

But this is exactly what is not happening. As we have seen, Elisha—unlike Elijah—does *not* prophesy against Baalism; he does *not* defend the covenant; he does *not* maintain the Torah. By these criteria, some of the miracles of Elisha appear to be functioning within the story as self-aggrandising, and their purpose within the text should not be considered wholly endorsing. This discussion naturally leads to consideration of the reputation which Elisha builds for himself.

Elisha's Reputation

When we compare the reputations of Elijah and Elisha, the dissimilarities between the prophets persist. The private testimonial of the widow concerning Elijah is that 'you are a man of God and the word of YHWH in your mouth is truth' (1. 17:24). More publicly, Elijah is reviled and pursued by state officials. Ahab describes him as 'troubler of Israel' (1. 18:17) and 'my enemy' (1. 21:20). Ahab and Jezebel seek to kill him (1. 18:10; 19:2).

Elisha's reputation appears much more extensive geographically, and he is generally more appreciated. Such is the respect he commands locally that the Shunammite talks her husband into providing a permanent guest room for

him (II. 4:9). In response to the later raising of her son, she prostrates herself at his feet (II. 4:37). The officials of Jericho send a delegation asking for his help (II. 2:19). The group of followers designated the sons of the prophets[25] are barely able to make a move without his permission (II. 4:1–2, 40, 43; 6:3,5).[26] He is spoken of with awe in the enemy state of Aram, both at the royal court (II. 6:12; 8:8), and in private dwellings (II. 5:3). Within state life, he is at times consulted by the king with respect (II. 6:21), and at other times held responsible for national disaster (II. 6:31). Indeed, of this last text, Stuart Lasine implies that YHWH and Elisha appear almost inextricable. 'The king begins by declaring that only the Lord can help, and then curses the man of God, whom he has every reason to believe could help' (Lasine, 1991, p. 43). The reader might reasonably wonder if Elisha himself is beginning to see them as somewhat indistinguishable.

Elisha's own concern for his reputation is first seen in his snippy response to the men who fail to take his advice (II. 2:18), and then in the incident of the bears (II. 2:23–24) where he uses immensely disproportionate punitive action for some minor name-calling. This incident is considered in a little more detail below.

Elisha reveals his self-promoting motivation in II Kings 5:8 when he sends a reply to the king of Israel, who is distressed at Naaman's request for healing:

> Let him come to me, and *he will learn that there is a prophet in Israel*!

Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible does a prophet voice such aspirations for his own fame. These words contrast somewhat uncomfortably with the words of Elijah on Carmel:

> YHWH, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, this day *let it be known that you are God in Israel*, and that I am your servant. (I. 18:36)

Three times in II Kings 1 the rebuke of Elijah, which eventually reaches the king, is expressed in the same way:

> Is it because there is no God in Israel? (vv. 3,6,16)

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25 That this designation probably refers to a travelling band of disciples rather than a prophetic guild is argued by T.R. Hobbs (2002, pp. 24–26).

26 This insight is identified by Wesley Bergen (1999, p. 176).

Clearly Elijah is concerned for his own reputation,[27] but it is clearly linked in his mind to that of YHWH.[28] By contrast, Elisha's focus is upon himself.

Perhaps most damning of all, II Kings 8 has a scene where the king is in his court asking Gehazi:

> Please recount to me all the great things that Elisha has done. (v. 4)

It would appear that Elisha's preoccupation with his own reputation has had its desired effect.

The Lying Prophet?

We have already considered in chapter 4 the instances where Elisha seems to be less than truthful. In summary, they are:

- II. 3:15–19 cf. v. 27 The partially fulfilled prophecy
- II. 6:19 Elisha lies to, and tricks, the blinded soldiers of Aram
- II. 8:10,14 Elisha appears to send a false prophecy to Ben-Hadad and to incite Hazael to his murder.

These pericopes have been discussed above, but it is worth noting here that they could amount to a slight upon either the integrity of the prophet, or his ability to discern the voice of YHWH correctly. So Wesley Bergen says of the last verse of II Kings 3, where the flight of Israel contradicts the earlier prophetic word:

> Verse 27 acts as a wrecking ball, knocking down the image of Elisha that I have carefully constructed from the words of the story. (Bergen W., 1999, p. 82)

Bergen also points out that the incitement to murder shown in II Kings 8 makes Elisha complicit in the 'war crimes' which he foresees that Hazael will perform (Bergen W., 1999, p. 160).

> I know the evil you will do to the sons of Israel. You will set fire to their fortified cities, you will slay their young men with the sword, you will dash their children, you will split open their pregnant women. (II. 8:12).

---

27 See II. 1:10,12.

28 Similarly, when David faces Goliath, he says he will kill him 'that all the earth will know *that there is a God in Israel*' (I Sam 17:46).

Three of the Elisha narratives in particular have attracted scholarly interest with regard to their possible theme of subversion against Elisha. These are now considered briefly.

The Irony of the Bears

In chapter 2 we considered the reception history of this pericope, and noted that it presents an ethical question about the prophet's conduct.

David Marcus (1995, pp. 43–66) has identified the short narrative of the prophet and the bears[29] (II. 2:23–25) as one of four pieces of anti-prophetic satire in the Hebrew Bible. He finds fantasticality,[30] grotesquery, exaggeration, irony, ridicule, parody and rhetorical techniques in the short narrative. While his study makes no allusion to Bakhtin, Marcus's proposal is clearly consonant with the seriocomic genre we are considering.

The grotesqueries need little explication: the paradigmatically fierce she-bears are described as attacking the young boys. Marcus also points out the grossly disproportionate nature of the punishment; the exaggeration (a large number of children injured by just two animals), and the irony of the life-giving prophet invoking YHWH to bring a curse. He also notes assonance, alliteration, chiasm and word play, which 'all point to a highly stylised artistic work which befits a satiric interpretation' (Marcus, 1995, p. 64).

Marcus considers that this story and those of Balaam (Num 22:21–35), the lying prophet (I Kgs 13), and Jonah, comprise a quartet of narratives critiquing wayward prophets of YHWH, caught up with their own petty concerns rather than their divine mission (Marcus, 1995, p. 168). Yet most commentators, while expressing some discomfort about the magnitude of the response, see this pericope as an endorsement of Elisha's fledgling ministry. If this is so, it is surely an ironic one. Elisha is being damned with faint praise: 'and *this* is how great he was!'

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29 Strictly, Elisha is not named in the narrative, although the positioning of the small pericope immediately after his name at the end of the previous story suggests that we are to be in little doubt about his identity.

30 With regard to fantasticality, Marcus points out that the early rabbinic commentators clearly identified this as a miracle, perhaps an implausible one, and that 'she-bears' and 'woods' subsequently entered the Hebrew language to designate that which was fabricated. Thus לֹא דֻבִּים וְלֹא יַעַר (no she-bears and no woods) became epigrammatic for something which was totally imaginary (Marcus, 1995, p. 48).

Satire of the Shunammite

We have already briefly considered this text. However, one of the most controversial of the Elisha narratives is the story of his interaction with the Shunammite woman (II. 4:8–37), and it has provoked considerable scholarly investigation in recent years.

Mary Shields (1993) has offered a feminist reading of the story and considers that it offers a veiled critique of Elisha. Contrasting it with other annunciation scenes in the Hebrew Bible, she notes how the woman, although unnamed, is proactive and dominant in many respects, and compared to whom, her husband is passive and eclipsed. In contrast, however, Elisha belittles her in a number of ways. On almost every occasion he speaks to her via a go-between, Gehazi (vv. 12–16, 25–26), referring to her as 'this Shunammite' (הַשֻּׁנַמִּית הַזֹּאת vv. 12,36), which is 'a classic status differentiation tactic' (Shields, 1993, p. 61). Further, he overrides her protestations (v. 16). 'No one thinks to ask whether a child is really the woman of Shunem's greatest desire' (Shields, 1993, p. 67). Shields considers that this amounts to 'a subtle critique of the man of God [...] evidenced by the surprising power and role reversals between the woman of Shunem and the man of God' (Shields, 1993, p. 66).

The absence of YHWH from the passage, noted by Shields, has been considered in greater detail by Gershon Hepner, who suggests that the arrangement between the Shunammite, her husband and Elisha constitutes a *ménage à trois*. The woman is a Shunammite, and the reader's mind is intended to turn, argues Hepner, to Abishag the Shunammite in I Kings 1:3 who warms David's bed for him 'and wonder whether Elisha's Shunammite will perform the same service for him' (Hepner, 2010, p. 391).

Hepner supports his thesis by arguing for the existence of a large number of sexual innuendos[31] within the passage (Hepner, 2010). Although at times some of Hepner's claims seem to stretch the point, his thesis that the text is hinting at Elisha's more direct involvement in the woman's pregnancy seems to me a possible one, in view of some probable sexual imagery, and the proactive way in which the woman 'feeds' him and has a bedroom set up for him. However, in view of the subliminal nature of this suggestion, I find it more plausible to argue that the text is raising the possibility as a deliberate innuendo, rather than that the text is making a sly allegation of fact.

Thus, in addition to my own findings suggestive of a subtle critique of Elisha, there is independent evidence from the wider scholarly community

31 The possibility of slight sexual innuendo in the passage was suggested by Rashi but the ancient rabbinic commentators suggest that the woman would not even have come into Elisha's presence (Rosenberg, 1993, p. 266).

that the narratives of the Shunammite and her son may critique the prophet on a number of levels: they portray him as patronising and autocratic, they cast an innuendo on his sexual ethics, and they hint at an attempted arrogation of the power of YHWH to himself.

Naaman and the Servants

The narrative (II Kgs 5) is at face value an exemplar for the quiet dignity of the man of God, whose miraculous healing humbles proud Naaman and whose miraculous judgement humbles proud Gehazi.

On initial reading, it is arrogant Naaman, greedy Gehazi and the two kings[32] who appear to come off worst in the narrative. By comparison, Elisha appears at the centre of the action to be quietly capable. Not seeking his own enrichment, he speaks with ethnic impartiality the word that heals, to the Gentile; and the word that curses, to the Israelite. However, closer attention to the characterization of Elisha within this passage suggests the presence of a subversive element below the surface of this text.

The narrative contains seven uses of the word עֶבֶד 'servant' (vv. 6,13,17 [twice], 18 [twice], 25), and seven instances of the word אָדוֹן 'master' (vv. 1,3,4,18,20,22,25). Conceptually related is the expression to be, or to stand, לִפְנֵי 'before the face of', which is found five times (vv. 2,3,15,16,23). This is an expression often used to refer to taking a subordinate position with respect to another individual. The frequency of these expressions which refer to service, or waiting upon someone, should alert us to this theme within the passage.

At the centre of the main story is the stand-off between Elisha and Naaman. Elisha will not dignify Naaman with a personal audience; Naaman's pride is injured by both the instruction and its mode of delivery (vv. 11–12). Neither will readily give way.

After Naaman's healing, however, his manner becomes altogether different, as we have seen. Elisha, however, remains aloof. Thus Naaman is almost fawning in his attempts to offer gifts to the prophet, but Elisha will not lower himself to accept them. Where Elisha has not once uttered the name of YHWH in connection with the healing (nor will he in connection with Gehazi's judgement), he here describes himself as one who *stands before* YHWH (v. 16). Whereas the

32 Although they only have cameo appearances, the kings' actions are a study in missing the point. The little girl has clearly indicated that Naaman should seek healing from the prophet in Samaria, but the king of Aram's letter makes no mention of such an individual (v. 6). Likewise, the king of Israel, who really should have known better, appears quite nonplussed by the request (v. 7). Thus, as Robert Cohn says, 'the writer mocks the impotence of royal authority' (Cohn, 2000, p. 37).

leitmotif of 'servant' has been used throughout the passage to indicate humility, real or feigned; here Elisha's self-description, as standing לִפְנֵי 'before' YHWH, has the opposite effect: to elevate himself before the Gentile.

In contrast to this theory, Robert Cohn has noted the similarity of phrasing between verses 15 and 16: Naaman stands before Elisha, Elisha stands before God. These, he says, 'establish the line of authority' (Cohn, 2000, p. 39), and therefore serve to authenticate Elisha's ministry. However, the comparison between parallel phrases is, I think, less striking than he suggests, for two reasons. First, the expression 'stand before' is used five times in the narrative, making the comparison between these particular two instances less compelling. Secondly, the expression in verse 15 is in the mouth of the narrator, whereas in verse 16 it is Elisha's words. On balance, I think the more plausible interpretation of Elisha's words is the self-aggrandisement with which he appropriates the term to himself and YHWH.

When Naaman's words spill over themselves in his lengthy explanation concerning the temple of Rimmon, four times referring to himself as 'your servant' (vv. 17–18), Elisha responds coolly with the two words לֵךְ לְשָׁלוֹם (Go in peace). Mordechai Cogan describes his words as 'laconic', adding, 'Elisha maintains the distance he established at the outset' (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 65). Naaman's manners have been improved by the encounter; Elisha's have not.

We have already commented on Elisha's reluctance to refer to YHWH when he performs his miracles, here and elsewhere. Indeed, Naaman speaks more of God in this passage than Elisha. Further, Elisha's rebuke to Gehazi (v. 26) hints at hubris:

> Did not my heart go with you when the man turned from his chariot to meet you?

This could, of course, all be part of the elevation of the man of God at the expense of the initially foolish Aramean, whose behaviour in turn shames that of the worthless servant; indeed, this is how the text is often read.[33] Clearly the dominant impression of Elisha in this passage is that of calm wielder of the healing power of YHWH, divinely imbued with second sight and authority. Nonetheless, below the surface of the text are subtle indicators that the text is not wholly approving of the man of God. These subtle indicators may amount to a further veiled critique of the prophet.

33 E.g. Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 67; Sweeney, 2007, pp. 298ff.

Evidence for an Anti-prophetic Satire

Our preceding argument concerning the critical representation of Elisha[34] would seem to undermine, and indeed, reverse the notion that these narratives are only included to bolster the reputation of the prophet. One of the principal questions which might be asked of the Elisha character, then, is this: what does he *achieve*?

Wesley Bergen has considered the question of Elisha's role within the narrated world (that is, within the 'real' world within which Elisha operates, rather than his role within the text). Despite the fact that Elisha is commissioned with the express purpose of eradicating Baalism (1. 19:17), he is nowhere seen to perform this function. Nor does he challenge Jezebel, arch-rival of Elijah; we only discover later that she is still alive (11. 9).

> [I]f Elisha is not at work opposing Baal, what exactly is he there for? He does not lead Israel as Moses and Samuel did. He does not challenge the people to return to YHWH as Elijah did. He does not act as conscience to the king of Israel as Nathan did. He brings no ethical imperative to either king or people. Instead, Elisha wanders the countryside doing miracles. (Bergen W., 1999, p. 176)

From these observations, in a closely argued thesis, Bergen suggests that the subversive representation of Elisha loosens the connection in the reader's mind between the prophet and YHWH, and between the prophet and his typical role as critic of the king (Bergen W., 1999, pp. 175–79). He thus concludes that the Elisha stories are an exploration of the 'correct' role of prophets within his own society. This thesis provides a powerful explanation of the purpose of the Elisha character within the text. However, I will argue that identifying the seriocomic function of the character shows us that Elisha's role is even more ambiguous than Bergen has perceived.

Iain Provan has suggested that through his miracles, Elisha is redressing the balance from the power-broking of his political ministry to emphasise his concern for the humble (Provan, 1995, p. 197). A similar perspective is offered by T.R. Hobbs, who points out the extent of Elisha's involvement with the Gentile (Hobbs, 2002, p. 68). We also recall Robert LaBarbera's designation of the siege of Samaria as a peasant narrative (LaBarbera, 1984) and

34 Critique of a prophet of YHWH is not unprecedented. Robert Polzin has shown how Samuel's protestations against kingship, more by what is unsaid than what is said, throw doubt upon his integrity and on his motives (Polzin, 1989, pp. 80–89).

Walter Brueggemann's extension of this thesis to suggest that that narrative represents an embarrassing interjection into the certitude of the royal recitals (Brueggemann, 1987). This foregrounding of the marginalised figures is a characteristic typical of the priorities of a seriocomic narrative.

As we have seen, the narratives of Elisha have many other additional seriocomic features. He is responsible for some rather grotesque deaths and for some strange feasts; he speaks in a dialect; his miracles largely fall into the previously defined category of 'fantasticality'; his narratives contain instances of verbal abuse, directed both towards and away from him; and his narratives contain a number of hierarchical reversals. Throughout, the text hints that we should view him with ambivalence.

The parallels between the Elijah and Elisha narratives are well-established.[35] Elijah's miracles are said to be mirrored and enlarged by Elisha, in accordance with the double portion of Elijah's spirit which he received, as suggested by Rashi in his commentary on 1 Kings 2:14 and 3:1 (Rosenberg, 1993, pp. 248, 252).[36]

However, as we have seen, Elisha conducts his ministry in a very different manner to Elijah. The phrase *taking up someone's mantle*[37] has become epigrammatic in modern English to refer to one who continues the life-work of another, but in actual fact Elisha appears to have little interest in continuing Elijah's mission.

Elisha has been compared to Joshua (Satterthwaite, 1998) in the way that they both succeed and extend the work of their greater predecessors, and there are certainly clear links between Moses and Elijah[38] to make this suggestion plausible. This does not, however, account for the critical way in which Elisha is represented in the text. One would expect him to be a lesser man if he is a second Joshua, but not an arrogant, self-serving one.

Conversely, as we have seen, other commentators have described the Elisha figure as trivial (Gray, 1970, pp. 29–30). While we might agree that Elisha himself is a petty man, it does not therefore follow that he is of petty *significance*. The very number of pericopes in which he features, and his role in international

35 See, for example, the work of Levine (1999), who shows multiple linkages, wordplays and allusions between the miracles of both prophets.

36 It should, however, be noted that a more accurate understanding of the 'double portion' of Elijah's spirit probably refers to the firstborn's share of the inheritance, that is, twice the allotment received by his brothers, as in Deut 21:17 (Hobbs, 2002, p. 21). By this reckoning, of course, Elisha actually bears a *smaller* degree of anointing than his predecessor.

37 Cf. II. 2:13.

38 Parallels include the parting of the waters, theophany on Horeb, and supernaturally mediated deaths. See, for example, Brodie, 2000, pp. 46–48; Gregory, 1990, pp. 144ff.

politics, would appear to suggest that he is significant both narratively and textually, even if his character struggles to support the weight of that importance.

The relationship between Elisha and his greater predecessor is illuminated by work done by Russell Gregory (Gregory, 1990, pp. 137ff.). Focussing mainly on Elijah, he notes many parallels between the prophet and Moses.

> This [Carmel] narrative finally judges Elijah in the midst of his peers. By deciphering the narrative hints, which referred to stories from the Hebrew memory, the judgement which weighed Elijah down emerged [...] The comparison to Moses capped this series of comparisons which left little doubt in the mind of the audience about how far Elijah had fallen from the model. (Gregory, 1990, pp. 151–52)

In Gregory's scheme, the text shows Elijah to be a lesser version of Moses, which demonstrates the slide of prophetism into disrepute and obsolescence. By extension it appears to imply that Elisha is being revealed as a lesser version of Elijah.

Additionally, the text seems to suggest that Elisha is largely autonomous, wandering the countryside on his own business, invoking the power of YHWH to curse and bless at whim, and accountable neither to the people around him to, nor to the God he claims to serve. In so doing, he portrays a glorious ambivalence towards the world around him. The Arameans may, or may not, be the enemy. Women may, or may not, be elevated and esteemed. Prophetic power may, or may not, be a constructive force within society.

This is strongly reminiscent of the role of the Fool in Bakhtinian thought (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 163). Fools, we recall, carry the right not to make common cause with any particular section of society; they have the right not to conform to expectations or to be taken literally; the right, we might add, not to be taken too seriously. Additionally, and very significantly, the existence of the Fool is relevant only in his relationship to another; he has no purpose in his own right, but rather he exists to offer an indirect comment on the other.

Is this an intra-diegetic[39] *mise-en-abyme*? With regard to Dällenbach's *signaux d'alerte*, it can hardly be doubted that the manifold repetitions of circumstances invites us to draw comparisons between the two men. So, when we read the story of Elijah, there is Elisha the Fool right behind him, coarsely aping him; mimicking his deeds, but introducing flaws in their performance; almost sharing the same skin, yet subverting his message. If Elijah is the (virtually)

39 In chapter 3 an intra-diegetic *mise-en-abyme* was defined as occurring within the universe of the narrative and without interrupting narrative continuity.

superhuman face of prophecy, Elisha shows its flawed underbelly. If Elijah is the golden boy of YHWH, Elisha is his rogue twin. If Elijah is noble and high-minded, Elisha is ignoble and crass.

Yet the role of the Fool is not only to invite laughter, but also to poke fun. When Elijah says: *I do this by the word of YHWH*, the clown behind him mutters: *no, by my word.* When Elijah says *that they might know there is a God in Israel*, Elisha raises an eyebrow and parodies: *or rather, that they might know there is a prophet in Israel.* Elijah may respond with dignity when insulted by Ahab (e.g. 1. 18:18), but Elisha whispers: *it's good to be taken seriously, isn't it?* before calling on the bears. He is like the stand-up comedian who parrots the words of the politician with just enough subversion that we find ourselves laughing, not *at* the comedian, but *with* him at the straight man. Or he is like the schoolboy who stands behind the teacher, mimicking him as he speaks. And with each little piece of subversion, our respect for Elijah withers a little more.[40]

So Elisha is functioning as an internal commentary on his predecessor. But his mirroring function is sophisticated and subtle, as we would expect from a polyphonic text. Thus the effect of all this foolery is not to elevate one man of God (Elijah) at the expense of another (Elisha). Neither Elisha nor Elijah is unambiguous; neither is 'good' or 'bad'; both are flawed. The carnival does not establish a new monologism, but rather it celebrates 'joyful relativity' (Bakhtin, 1984a, pp. 122–24).

We conclude that no-one is exempt from the laughter. We began the chapter by noting the mockery of the pagan prophets; we close it by seeing how the subversion extends to the mighty Elijah himself. One of the functions of these texts, then, may be that they serve to undermine our respect for the pompous absolutism of the prophet, be he true man of God or false prophet of Baal.[41] These tales will not permit us to elevate the prophet above contradiction or mockery. He is fallible, flawed and sometimes downright ludicrous.

It was commented in a previous chapter that, apart from the degradation of the temple of Baal in II Kings 9, there are apparently no elements of seriocomic profanation in the text. However, by the way that the prophets are mocked and satirised by the text—not just the false prophets, but also the men of God—this in itself could be considered to amount to a sort of 'profanation' on a larger

40 This mockery is, of course, a subtle narrative device of the text; there is nothing in the text that suggests to us that Elisha the man is other than Elijah's loyal attendant, during his master's life.

41 This is consonant with David Marcus's study on Elisha and the bears, and on other satirical tales (Jonah, Balaam and the lying prophet of I Kgs 13), where he argues that its purpose is to target prophetic types rather than real-life individuals. (Marcus, 1995, p. 168)

level of textuality. The role of 'man of God', hitherto—arguably—held in high esteem and above contradiction, has been opened up, examined and partially debased by the seriocomic features within the text.

Having considered the subversion of the prophets, we will shortly consider the subversion of the nations of Israel and Judah. First, however, it is necessary to return briefly to a key text we have already identified, 1 Kings 19:15–17.

CHAPTER 6

The Command-Prophecy Formula

> *Fool:* Nuncle, give me an egg and I'll give thee two crowns.
> *Lear:* What two crowns shall they be?
> *Fool:* Why, after I have cut the egg i'the middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i'the middle, and gavest away both parts, thou borest thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt. Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest the golden one away.
>
> WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*, 1608, pp. 1. 4.155–163.[1]

∴

In chapter 2, I drew attention to an unexpected little section within the narrative of Elijah at Horeb, which I designated the 'Command-Prophecy' formula. In 1 Kings 19:15–17, Elijah is instructed to anoint three 'new brooms' who will sweep the Baalists from Israel:[2]

> YHWH said to him 'Go, return to your way to the wilderness of Damascus and when you arrive, anoint Hazael king over Aram.
>
> And anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-Meholah as prophet instead of you.
>
> Those escaping from the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and those escaping from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill.'

1 I choose this quotation from *King Lear* because here is exposed the folly of the eponymous king in turning the world upside down (by giving away his kingdom to his daughters). It is the role of the anonymous Fool to draw Lear's attention to his imprudence. The themes of crowning, inversion and truth to power are highly relevant for this investigation, and the idea of twin crowns is somewhat resonant with 1 Kings 19:15–17, which I shall in this chapter argue is a 'crowning' event for two kings and a prophet.

2 Although Baal is not named in these verses, it is clear both from the preceding narrative and from the following verse that the prophesied purge is against Baalism (cf. DeVries, 2003, p. 236).

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As we saw, these verses have attracted scholarly attention because of the unprecedented instruction to anoint a prophet, and because Elijah never does anoint any of the individuals named here. However, as I indicated, my questions are different. As the verses name characters that will not appear for a long while, I am interested in their narrative significance within the larger text. It is the purpose of this chapter to revisit these questions. This will lay the groundwork for the following chapter, where the roles of Aram, Israel and Judah will be compared.

Establishing an Inclusio

One of the notable features of the Command-Prophecy, which largely accounts for the interest it has aroused in source-critical circles, is its anachronism. At the time the words are apparently spoken, Elisha is a nobody ploughing an obscure field; and both Ben-Hadad and Ahab are secure upon their thrones. There is no other hint within the text that either king is about to be supplanted.[3] However, whereas Elisha is introduced in the next verse, Jehu and Hazael are still some chapters away from making their debut. The Command-Prophecy, then, functions like a 'spoiler' within the plot. When we read of the battles between Ben-Hadad and Ahab, and their subsequent collusion (1 Kgs 20), the irony of the situation is apparent. The kings may plot, plan and connive, but the reader who bears in mind the sentence pronounced upon them, knows they are but dead men walking.

As we saw in chapter 2, Aram makes a cameo appearance a few times in the early part of Kings. However, it is not until after the Command-Prophecy that the nation of Aram becomes a player in its own right, with expanded narratives containing more detailed characterisation and more comprehensive description of events. Thus it is in the following chapters that we meet the Aramean commander Naaman and his household (II. 5:1–3); we listen to Aramean court discussions about Elisha (II. 6:8–13); and we meet the drunken king of Aram who cannot command his troops (I. 20:16–18). So the Command-Prophecy appears to function to herald the 'arrival' of Aram into the narrative. This foregrounding of Aram should alert the reader that the nation has an important textual role to play.

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3 Of course, it is in fact Ahab's son Joram who is murdered by Jehu (for the lineage see I. 22:40; II. 1:19; II. 9:24), nonetheless Jehu's mission is clearly cast in terms of the elimination of the house of Ahab (II. 9:8; 10:11).

As some commentators observe, the Command-Prophecy appears to mark the virtual end of Elijah's ministry (although he is still active in the Naboth narrative, 1 Kgs 21)[4] and the beginning of Elisha's ministry (e.g. Cogan, 2001, p. 457).

The Command-Prophecy marks the announcement or prolepsis of a tri-partite function, shared between Elisha, Jehu and Hazael. It is also noteworthy that all three men die within close proximity to one another in the text. Elisha and Hazael die in almost consecutive verses (II. 13:20 and 24 respectively). Although the death of Jehu is announced at the end of II Kings 10, the concluding part of his son Jehoahaz's succession formula does not occur until II Kings 13, with the intervening two chapters being a parenthetical look at the events which took place in Judah during Jehu's reign. To illustrate the manner in which the standard regnal account is split, I have compared it with another death-succession account, from II Kings 13:8–11. This is shown in the table below.

So Jehu's 'death' in the text takes place in two halves, and it is not until the beginning of II Kings 13 that the Israel narrative 'moves on' from Jehu. Arguably therefore his reign concludes here, along with Elisha and Hazael's. This is represented in Figure 7 below.

Crowning-decrowning

The rising together and falling together of the three 'new brooms' is an unusual device which alerts the reader to the possibility of something important. In terms of accession, Hazael and Jehu will seize power in a series of bold, seriocomic, moves; Elisha will have power thrust upon him by an unprecedented supernatural event. Nonetheless, it is at the Command-Prophecy that they are all set aside for the work that YHWH has for them.

In chapter 4, we saw that Francisco García-Treto identifies the striking narrative of Jehu's accession to the throne as a crowning event. Here we find that this anointing is proleptically announced chapters ahead. Likewise, with the death of Jehu: rather than being confined to the somewhat bland regnal announcement at the end of II Kings 10, it is part of a significant textual device which closes the *inclusio*. Rather than being single textual events, the crowning-decrowning *motifs* are nested within one another like Russian dolls.[5]

4 The LXX's reversal of II Kings 20 and 21 does not affect this.

5 This rather nice analogy is from Professor García-Treto, personal communication.

Comparison of Death and succession accounts for Jehu–to–Jehoahaz and Jehoahaz–to–Jehoash.

Death and succession: Jehu to Jehoahaz		**Death and succession: Jehoahaz to Jehoash**		
וְיֶתֶר דִּבְרֵי יֵהוּא וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְכָל־גְּבוּרָתוֹ הֲלוֹא־הֵם כְּתוּבִים עַל־סֵפֶר דִּבְרֵי הַיָּמִים לְמַלְכֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃	II. 10:34	וְיֶתֶר דִּבְרֵי יְהוֹאָחָז וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וּגְבוּרָתוֹ הֲלוֹא־הֵם כְּתוּבִים עַל־סֵפֶר דִּבְרֵי הַיָּמִים לְמַלְכֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃	II. 13:8	As for the other events of X and all that he did, and [all] his achievements, are they not written in the book of the deeds of the days of the kings of Israel?
וַיִּשְׁכַּב יֵהוּא עִם־אֲבֹתָיו וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ בְּשֹׁמְרוֹן וַיִּמְלֹךְ יְהוֹאָחָז בְּנוֹ תַּחְתָּיו	II. 10:35	וַיִּשְׁכַּב יְהוֹאָחָז עִם־אֲבֹתָיו וַיִּקְבְּרֻהוּ בְּשֹׁמְרוֹן וַיִּמְלֹךְ יוֹאָשׁ בְּנוֹ תַּחְתָּיו	II. 13:9	So X slept with his fathers and they buried him in Samaria. And Y his son reigned in his place.
וְהַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר מָלַךְ יֵהוּא עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֶשְׂרִים וּשְׁמֹנֶה־שָׁנָה בְּשֹׁמְרוֹן	II. 10:36			And the days that Jehu reigned over Israel in Samaria were twenty eight years.
NARRATIVE SUSPENDS		NARRATIVE CONTINUES WITHOUT PAUSE		
בִּשְׁנַת עֶשְׂרִים וְשָׁלֹשׁ שָׁנָה לְיוֹאָשׁ בֶּן־אֲחַזְיָהוּ מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה מָלַךְ יְהוֹאָחָז בֶּן־יֵהוּא עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשֹׁמְרוֹן שֶׁבַע עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה	II. 13:1	בִּשְׁנַת שְׁלֹשִׁים וָשֶׁבַע שָׁנָה לְיוֹאָשׁ מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה מָלַךְ יְהוֹאָחָז בֶּן־יְהוֹאָחָז עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשֹׁמְרוֹן שֵׁשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה	II. 13:10	In the [a]th year of Joash [son of Ahaziah], king of Judah; Y, son of X became king. He reigned over Israel in Samaria for [b] years
וַיַּעַשׂ הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אַחַר חַטֹּאת יָרָבְעָם בֶּן־נְבָט אֲשֶׁר־הֶחֱטִיא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־סָר מִמֶּנָּה	II. 13:2	וַיַּעַשׂ הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה לֹא סָר מִכָּל־חַטֹּאות יָרָבְעָם בֶּן־נְבָט אֲשֶׁר־הֶחֱטִיא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּהּ הָלָךְ	II. 13:11	He did evil in the eyes of YHWH. He did not depart from all [he walked according to] the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to sin, he walked in it [he did not depart from it]

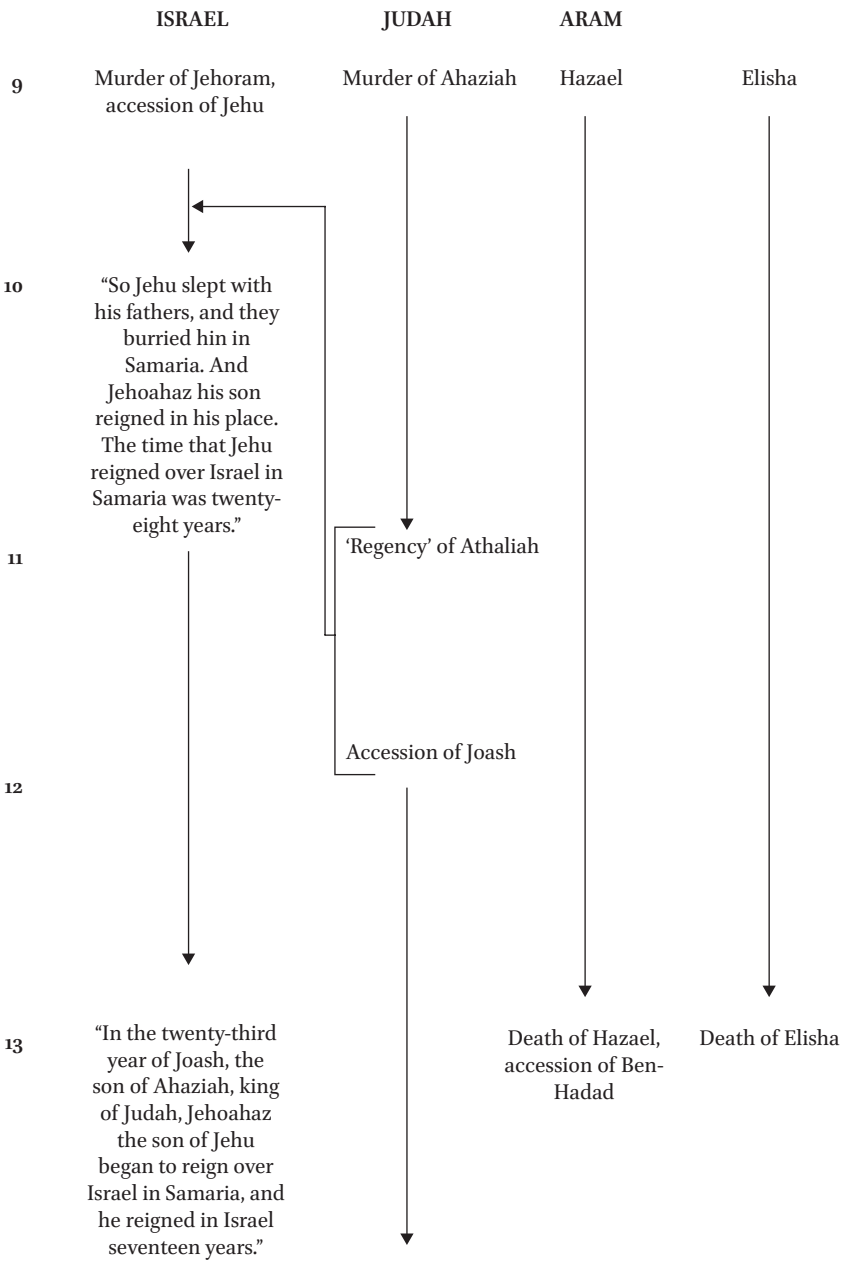

FIGURE 7 *Chronology and textual representation of the lives of Jehu, Hazael and Elisha.*

In the Bakhtinian scheme, the crowning event will bring to prominence an unexpected figure, probably from the lower social strata, who will act clownishly, with ambivalent behaviour and indecorous conduct, before being decrowned with ignominy. Does my proposal satisfy these criteria?

Certainly all three of the characters named in the Command-Prophecy are unexpected leaders. Neither Jehu nor Hazael should have risen to kingship; the narrative suggests that neither of them had considered it before Elisha's intervention. Indeed, both seem to express reservations about the notion. Jehu appears reluctant to act on the emissary's intervention (II. 9:11–13), and Hazael dissembles to Elisha:

> What is your servant, the dog, that he should do such a great thing? (II. 8:13)

Elisha is ploughing with 12 teams of oxen when he received his call, and the fact that he is in a position to sacrifice a pair of the animals places him among the wealthy.[6] Nonetheless, the nature of Elisha's ministry, which is largely conducted among the peasant class, makes him a prophet quite different from the mould of Elijah. Like the new kings, he also appears to express rather less than wholehearted enthusiasm for his new role; at Elijah's summoning, Elisha 'returns from following him' (v. 21) and the forward movement of the narrative is delayed while he bids goodbye to his parents and hosts a farewell feast.[7]

So the Command-Prophecy selects three somewhat reluctant and partially unsuitable men, which is consistent with what we might expect of a crowning event.

I have already argued that the figure of Elisha acts within the text as a Fool, with the text raising significant questions around his conduct. García-Treto has shown how Jehu is an agent of disorder, boundary-breaking and reversal (García-Treto, 1990). In comparison, the character of Hazael remains more obscure, but there are two features which are of interest in this regard.

First, in II Kings 10:32, we read that Hazael acts as YHWH's instrument to reduce Israel's territory: 'In those days, YHWH began to trim Israel, as Hazael struck the whole territory of Israel'. These verses arrest and reverse the forward trajectory of the preceding chapters. Jehu's aggressive coup, his power-seizing, and his purging of the Baal cult have seemed inexorable. But in verse 32,

6 Cf. Wray Beal, 2014, p. 255.

7 Cf. Walsh, 1996, p. 279.

preceded by a few words of authorial criticism, Jehu the striker (II. 9:7,24,27; 10:11,17,25) is struck by Hazael.[8]

Second, a similar narrative *volte-face* takes place in II Kings 12:17. We have just read how Joash, king of Israel, has been repairing the temple and restocking the treasury; the passage is full of references to silver (כֶּסֶף) and gold (זָהָב). Then in verses 17–18 (18–19 in MT), Hazael appears on the scene, and Joash strips the temple treasury to induce him to abandon his threats.

> So Joash, king of Judah, took all the sacred objects which were consecrated by his fathers Jehoshaphat, Joash and Ahaziah, kings of Judah, and his sacred objects, and all the gold found in the treasuries of the temple of YHWH and in the palace of the king, and he sent it to Hazael king of Aram, who arose from against Jerusalem. (II. 12:19 MT)

As we would expect in a seriocomic text, nothing is absolute, settled or stable. Jehu and Hazael have been raised up for a shared purpose, but this does not prevent the one from destabilising the other. Hazael has been authorised to bring an end to Baalism, but this does not mean that he is unequivocally on the side of the reformer Joash of Judah. As Robert Cohn says:

> In both cases the information about Hazael's incursions is reserved until after equilibrium has been restored. The effect is to upset the newly achieved balance and throw Judah's future once more into doubt. (Cohn, 2000, p. 83)

My proposed decrowning event is more problematical to demonstrate. The deaths of Jehu and Hazael are barely heralded in the text, but the demise of Elisha shows a return to the fantastical, bizarre narrative which has been the hallmark of his ministry. Thus he exercises one final piece of sympathetic magic (II. 13:15–19), and his death is accompanied by one last revivification (v. 21). The reappearance of Elisha at this point in the text is, in itself, remarkable, as we last heard of him in II Kings 9:1. Once again, where we find ourselves surprised by the order or placement of portions of the narrative, the final-form critic will pay particular attention to the text at this point.

Because of the florid nature of Elisha's death, and because the text appears to make a point of bringing the reigns of Hazael and Jehu to a close at the same

8 This has also been noted by Lissa Wray Beal (Wray Beal, 2014, p. 382).

point, it would seem, for reasons of symmetry, that II Kings 13 represents the decrowning of the three 'new brooms' as the *inclusio* closes.

Limits of the Central Section

It will have been noted that I have so far omitted to define the exact boundaries of the so-called 'central section' of Kings which is the focus for my investigation. This is because there are several candidates for the limits. As I have shown, the majority of the seriocomic features are associated with the Elijah-Elisha narratives, or with the Aram cycle. The association of these with Ahab and his house is also notable. For this reason, it might seem appropriate to infer that the central section commences with the rise of the house of Omri in I Kings 16:21, and concludes with fall of the house of Omri in II Kings 9–10. This does not, however, take account of the importance of the Command-Prophecy in shaping the structure of the text. Nor does it explain the recurrence of the seriocomic theme in II Kings 13 at the death of Elisha.

A second possibility, then, is that the central section is bounded by the *inclusio* formed by the crowning and decrowning events described above. The problem with this is that it omits some early events in the Elijah narrative, which have clear seriocomic features.

My conclusion is that while the *inclusio* provides a structure for, and boundaries around, one particular seriocomic narrative, the seriocomic *motifs* are generally associated with the northern narratives and as such are more widely distributed in the text than the *inclusio* itself. In other words, the boundaries are permeable, and the genre erupts from time to time in unexpected places. This will explain, for example, how the bizarre events of I Kings 13, which has elements of masking, fantasticality and forbidden feasting, can be seriocomic yet fall outside the formal boundaries of the central section. We note, too, that passage's focus on Israel: it concerns the cultic centre Bethel, contains several of Rendsburg's 'northernisms' (Rendsburg, 2002, pp. 29–36), and is regarded by source critical scholars as largely northern in origin (e.g. Cogan, 2001, p. 374; DeVries, 2003, p. 168).

Setting Up a Parallelism

An important theme within this *inclusio*, which appears to be introduced by the Command-Prophecy, is the parallelism which it establishes between Aram and Israel, as Elijah is commanded to anoint the two kings in identical terms.

> Anoint Hazael king over Aram. And anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, king over Israel [...] Those escaping from the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and those escaping from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. (I. 19:15–17)

The similar roles played by Elisha in precipitating the accessions of Hazael and Jehu (II Kings 8 and 9) should not be overlooked, nor should the other similarities between the two kings' accessions, which are set almost adjacent to one another in the narrative. Thus, both men are trusted by their masters: Hazael is sent on an important mission on the king's behalf (8:8); Jehu is left to help lead the army when his king is wounded (9:4,15). Both ousted kings are ill at the time of their assassination (8:7; 9:15). As we have already seen, both new kings express initial reticence about their appointment, but neither prospective monarch appears to require too much persuasion: Hazael suffocates Ben-Hadad the day after his return (II. 8:15), and Jehu drives 'madly' (II. 9:20) to Jezreel to murder Joram.

So it seems that the formula which links the crowning of Hazael and Jehu appears to establish a parallelism between them, which is further developed in the prophecy's fulfilment in the accession of the two kings in II Kings 8 and 9. In the following chapter, I shall extend this by presenting evidence that Aram is used within the central section of Kings as a comparator for Israel.

CHAPTER 7

Satire against Kings and Nations

> Laugh on laugh on my freind
> Hee laugheth best that laugheth to the end
>
> Quotation from the anonymous Jacobean play *The Christmas Prince. An account of the St. John's College Revels held at Oxford in 1607–8.* (published 1816)

∴

In chapter 2 we considered some of the unexpected features within the central section of Kings. We have noted that, although regnal accounts for both kingdoms are given throughout the book, the action in this central section mainly takes place within the court and kingdom of Ahab and his successors. Even the occasional involvement of the king of Judah within the narrative does not shift the action or focus to the Southern Kingdom for long (with the exception of the reign of Athaliah, which we will consider below). In this regard, the central part of the book of Kings stands at odds with the remainder of the book, which is largely Judaeo-centric.

Another of the features we noted was the prominence of Aram, and the ambivalence of its relationship with Israel. The previous chapter showed that the Command-Prophecy formula appears to set up some parallelisms between the kings of Aram and Israel.

It is the argument of this chapter that within the book of Kings the subversive and critical representation of Aram functions as a *mise-en-abyme* to comment upon the nation of Israel, and thence, by subtle and unexpected extension, to subvert our opinion of Judah herself.

Critique of Aram Mirrored upon Israel

We will first consider the mirroring that occurs between Aram and Israel. In this regard there are two particular key texts, which we will now consider.

The Wise and Foolish Kings

1 Kings 20 tells the story of two battles between Aram and Israel. It is characterised by a number of devices which appear to make a comparison between

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Aram and Israel. As we shall see, the juxtaposition of the two nations and their kings draws our attention to their similarities and differences.

There is a suggestion of symmetry within the account between the nations. There are two kings, two armies, two nations, and two sets of counsellors. We are party to the war cabinet conversations of both kings; we watch them both mustering their troops for battle. At the conclusion of the first battle, in a neat piece of prose, we are told (v. 20):

וַיַּכּוּ אִישׁ אִישׁוֹ	Man killed his man
וַיָּנָס אֲרָם וַיִּרְדְּפֵם יִשְׂרָאֵל	And Aram fled and Israel pursued.

Clearly, the concept itself is not surprising to us as the battle plays out in the text, but the way the tale is told suggests an element of correspondence or parity between the armies. The way the second half of the verse is structured is redolent of poetic parallelism, where corresponding elements are compared or contrasted.

Later, the narrator tells us twice that, on the eve of the second battle, the two armies are camped *opposite* one another (vv. 27–29).[1] Admittedly neither נֶגֶד in 1 Kings 20:27 nor נֹכַח in v. 29 carries a necessary sense of the matching of equals, but rather of being 'in front of'; however, it is possible that the repetition of the idea is intended to intensify the other elements of pairing within the text.

As is typical of biblical discourse, the dialogue takes place between only two parties at a time. In four cases, this takes the form of paired utterances between Ben-Hadad and Ahab.[2] Each exchange increases our approval of the king of Israel in comparison with his Aramean counterpart.

1. The first exchange is found in vv. 3–4:

[Ben-Hadad]

כַּסְפְּךָ וּזְהָבְךָ לִי־הוּא וְנָשֶׁיךָ וּבָנֶיךָ הַטּוֹבִים לִי־הֵם

Your gold and your silver are mine; the best of your wives and your children are mine.

---

1 The word used in verse 27 is נֶגֶד, usually translated 'opposite'. However, it can bear the sense of correspondence, although this is generally in association with a preposition. For example, Genesis 2:18 reads אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ 'I will make a helper for him corresponding to him'; see also verse 20 of the same chapter (*BDB* p. 617).

2 In fact, the first three of these conversations take place through intermediaries, but the text is set up in such a way that they do not intrude on the exchange of words between the kings.

[Ahab]

כִּדְבָרְךָ אֲדֹנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ לְךָ אֲנִי וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־לִי

As you say, my lord the king, I and all that I have are yours.

We note the prominence of personal pronouns and pronominal suffixes in both these speeches. Both use the first person and second person pronominal suffixes several times. Bah-Hadad's 'I' is about acquisition, whereas Ahab's 'I' is about submission; likewise the second person pronouns emphasise the same rank disparity. The distinction may be lessened, however, by Ahab's use of אֲנִי rather than אָנֹכִי, which E.J. Revell has shown tends to be used by status-marked individuals, such as kings (Revell, 1995, p. 116). Ahab's use of the word in this context may indicate that he is less intimidated than he appears; his ready acquiescence, however, would seem to suggest otherwise. At the beginning of the passage the power balance is clearly in Aram's favour.

2. The next two speeches (vv. 5–6, 9) are separated by Ahab taking counsel with his advisors.

[Ben-Hadad]

כִּי־שָׁלֹחַ שָׁלַחְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ לֵאמֹר כַּסְפְּךָ וּזְהָבְךָ וְנָשֶׁיךָ וּבָנֶיךָ לִי תִתֵּן׃
כִּי אִם־כָּעֵת מָחָר אֶשְׁלַח אֶת־עֲבָדַי אֵלֶיךָ וְחִפְּשׂוּ אֶת־בֵּיתְךָ וְאֵת בָּתֵּי עֲבָדֶיךָ וְהָיָה כָּל־מַחְמַד עֵינֶיךָ יָשִׂימוּ בְיָדָם וְלָקָחוּ

I sent to you, saying: Give your silver and your gold and your women and your children to me. However, this time tomorrow I will send my servants to you, and they will search your house and the houses of your servants and will lay hands on all that is desirable in your eyes and take it.

Ben-Hadad is portrayed as increasingly and unreasonably demanding. If there is a vassal treaty between the states, as seems likely,[3] his initial demand would

3 It appears likely that Israel is a vassal state of Aram at this point in the narrative; the other alternative is that Ben-Hadad is so dominant militarily that he feels able to extort money from the king of Israel. Mordecai Cogan points out that the easy ingress and egress of soldiers and messengers in and out of the city makes a siege situation appear unlikely; also the Aramean military base at Succot is too far away for a siege headquarters (Cogan, 2001, pp. 462–63). Similarly, John Gray argues that 'Aram' designates a confederacy of many tribal chiefs or local sheikhs; Ahab's readiness to comply with the initial terms indicates that the Israel was overrun by the Aramean army (Gray, 1970, pp. 420–22). A somewhat different

have been within its terms (Wiseman, 1958), but his second demand seems excessive. Ahab, however, has grown in confidence:

> [Ahab]
> אִמְרוּ לַאדֹנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁלַחְתָּ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ בָּרִאשֹׁנָה אֶעֱשֶׂה וְהַדָּבָר הַזֶּה לֹא אוּכַל לַעֲשׂוֹת
>
> Say to my lord the king: all that you first demanded of your servant I will do, but this thing I am not able to do.

3. The third pair of speeches is found in verses 10–11.

These are both highly stylised; Ben-Hadad's takes the form of a typical oath formula (e.g. II Sam 3:35; I Kgs 19:2); while Ahab's is in the form of a proverb, in that it is verbally spare, epigrammatical, and it communicates a general truth.[4]

> [Ben-Hadad]
> כֹּה־יַעֲשׂוּן לִי אֱלֹהִים וְכֹה יוֹסִפוּ אִם־יִשְׁפֹּק עֲפַר שֹׁמְרוֹן לִשְׁעָלִים לְכָל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בְּרַגְלָי
>
> Thus may the gods do to me, and may they continue, if a handful of the dust of Samaria is sufficient for all the people at my feet.
>
> [Ahab]
> אַל־יִתְהַלֵּל חֹגֵר כְּמַפַּתֵּחַ
>
> One who is putting on his armour should not boast like one who is removing it.

This heteroglossic piece of flyting[5] strengthens the characterization of Ben-Hadad as arrogant and blustering, but now the previously subservient Ahab refuses to be intimidated. His reply, although insulting, does not stoop to the level of his interlocutor. It is terse and dismissive. With four simple words,

---

perspective is offered by Marvin Sweeney, who argues that Ahab's surrender of goods and personnel to the king of Aram amounted to the *establishment* of a vassal treaty (Sweeney, 2007, p. 241).

4 Cf. Ryken *et al.*, 2000, p. 679.

5 Flyting is the stylised exchange of insults. This exchange was identified as flyting on p. 77, where there is further discussion on the matter.

he dismisses the posturing of the Aramean king and is beginning to sound statesman-like.[6]

4. By the final exchange of speeches, the power balance has wholly tipped towards Israel (v. 34):

> [Ben-Hadad]
> הֶעָרִים אֲשֶׁר־לָקַח־אָבִי מֵאֵת אָבִיךָ אָשִׁיב וְחוּצוֹת תָּשִׂים לְךָ בְדַמֶּשֶׂק כַּאֲשֶׁר־שָׂם אָבִי בְּשֹׁמְרוֹן
>
> The cities which my father took from your father, I will return. And you [can] put bazaars for yourself in Damascus as my father did in Samaria.
>
> [Ahab]
> וַאֲנִי בַּבְּרִית אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָּ
>
> With this covenant I will release you.

That this last phrase is to be understood as the words of Ahab to Ben-Hadad is in concordance with all the major Bible translations. However, Simon DeVries has suggested a variant translation of this verse (DeVries, 2003, p. 243); this is considered below.

These four exchanges between the kings reveal a trajectory in their fortunes. At the outset, as we have seen, the power balance is in Aram's favour, so Ben-Hadad appears arrogant and acquisitive, Ahab meek and cowed.

Ben-Hadad soon over-reaches himself, however. With what Jonathan Robker calls 'ridiculous hyperbole', the king of Aram demands all that Ahab possesses. 'Not only will he take what he likes, he'll take what you like, too' (Robker, 2011, p. 652). This second demand sharpens Ahab's mettle; he defies the king of Aram and the stage is set for battle.

Verses 12–18 describe the battle preparations, and here, as Robker has pointed out (Robker, 2011, pp. 652–53), the king of Aram is sorely satirised. While Ahab is again taking wise counsel and making his plans, Ben-Hadad is twice described as drinking himself into inebriation, as we saw in chapter 4. He delegates the attack to his officers, preferring to stay in the drinking booths (v. 12); by the time that battle commences, he is so drunk that he appears unable to speak or think sensibly (v. 18). Indeed, the fact that he is drunk when the battle commences at noon leads us to conclude either that Ben-Hadad has been drinking all night, or that he started very early in the morning!

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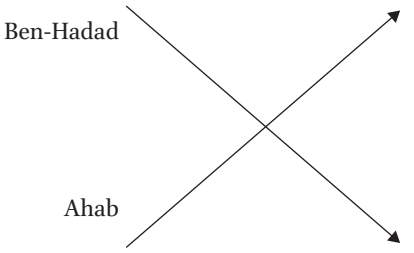
6 Jonathan Robker describes this utterance as 'sagacious' (Robker, 2011, p. 652).

The battle is won by Israel, but another follows the next year. Verses 22–24 describe the preparations for the second battle by the two kings. For the third time, Ahab is taking wise counsel (v. 22); by contrast Ben-Hadad is receiving very bad advice indeed. Based on a fatal misapprehension of the nature of YHWH, he decides to raise another army, just like the first (וְסוּס תַּחַת סוּסוֹ וְרֶכֶב תַּחַת רִכְבּוֹ horse for horse and chariot for chariot, v. 25). When we discover that Aram is again to be defeated by Israel, the idiocy of Ben-Hadad in returning to his folly[7] is underlined by this *motif*.

As Jerome Walsh points out, the scope of the conflict has escalated. Originally it was Ben-Hadad's army against Samaria (vv. 1,12); the second time around (vv. 26–27) it is nation upon nation (Walsh, 1996, p. 304).

Notwithstanding the disparate size of the armies, because of YHWH's presence with Israel (v. 28), the Arameans are routed. If the narrative ended here, as some source critics tell us it did in its original form,[8] it would make a very neat, symmetrical pattern. We could conclude the analysis of the narrative with all the loose ends neatly tied up and a strong case made for a pro-Israel text satirising the Aramean enemy. Indeed, I consider that the otherwise insightful paper by Jonathan Robker *Satire and the King of Aram* makes exactly this mistake. In concluding his analysis at the end of verse 34, I think Robker fails to identify the way that the text then turns to satirise Ahab as well.

If we conclude the passage at verse 34, the king of Israel is shown to be prudent and God-fearing. By contrast, the king of Aram is satirised as overweening, drunken and godless (or rather, he does not know YHWH). The nation of Israel is subservient and weak, but gains the victory; the army of Aram 'fills the country', but is defeated. The decline of Ben-Hadad's fortunes is exactly matched by the rise of Ahab's:



7 Cf. Proverbs 26:11.

8 The break is said to lie between verses 34 and 35 (Gray, 1970, p. 431; Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 472).

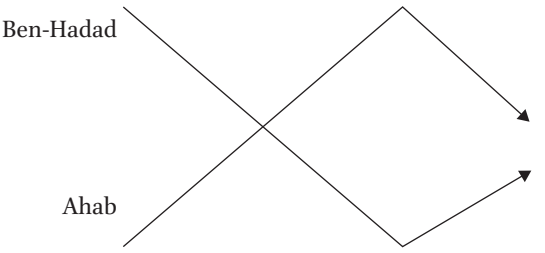
However, the final form of the text does not allow us to stop here, and there is a twist in the tail. It begins with the extension of the narrative to reveal the events that occur after the battle. The defeated Ben-Hadad decides to sue for peace. He sends his servants, penitentially dressed, to beg for the sparing of his life (v. 32). Perhaps to the surprise of the reader, Ahab has mercy on him, and indeed, shows him some marks of favour, in the exchange of speeches we considered above (vv. 33–34).

It is the role of an unnamed prophet to unmask the actions of the king (vv. 35–43). As has been shown in chapter 4, this prophet plays the part of the Fool very well. He has no function other than to comment on the king's actions; he invites injury to himself; and he uses the ruse of anonymity to speak truth to power in a creative fashion.

As the prophet does this, the reader's estimation of Ahab begins to fall. His pardoning of the king, far from being an act of prudence and mercy, is now revealed as an act of military rashness and theological arrogance. Rather than heeding the voice of YHWH, as he did previously, he has ended up by acting in direct contravention of YHWH's law.

Verse 43 tells us that after the rebuke Ahab goes home סַר וְזָעֵף (ill-tempered and furious). The word סַר (ill-humoured, stubborn) is used three times to describe Ahab: here and in 1 Kings 21. It is an unusual word, found in only one other place (Jer. 6:28), where it is applied to the people of Judah. Its cognate סרר is the verb used to describe the insubordinate son in Deuteronomy 21:18. Thus the statesman-like quality of Ahab's earlier speech (vv. 11,32,34) gives way to an impression of the man as sulky and petulant.

The fortunes of Ben-Hadad and Ahab appear to be reversing again. Ben-Hadad has been reprieved, and has managed to negotiate a peace treaty. By contrast, Ahab's fortunes appear to be taking a turn for the worse:



It is not just Ahab's fortunes which have reversed. His character, too, is being redrawn. Whereas he has been depicted as wise, god-fearing and merciful

(v. 31), at the end he is denounced for failing to obey YHWH; and, one might infer, for allowing sentiment to cloud his judgment.

This apparent *volte-face* in the portrayal of Ahab has been considered by some to be revisionist history.[9] Such an interpretation, however, fails to account for this disjunction with anything other than a nod to the 'heavy hand of the redactor'.[10] A synchronic reading, however, with attention paid to the possibility of seriocomic decrowning and foolery, invites us to draw a different, and arguably more subtle, conclusion.[11]

The conversation between the kings at the end is revealing. We might have expected Ahab to eliminate his protagonist, or at most, send him away. This is not the case, however. Rather, Ahab seems very concerned to emphasise the parity between the kings; first calling Ben-Hadad אָחִי (my brother, v. 32) and then enacting that parity by inviting him into his own chariot (v. 33).[12] Ben-Hadad's words, too, are phrased in such a way that we see a restoration of the symmetry between the nations:[13]

> The cities which my father took from your father, I will return. And you [can] put bazaars for yourself in Damascus as my father did in Samaria. (I. 20:34)

Jerome Walsh has made an observation which supports this hypothesis. He points out that during the first battle, when 'each man struck his man' (v. 20), the text makes no distinction between Israel and Aram; 'in the moment of battle the sides are indistinguishable' (Walsh, 1996, p. 301). This is then echoed in the conversation between the two kings after the second battle (v34). When Ben-Hadad concedes the cities and bazaars to Ahab, most translations read 'Ben-Hadad said to him' but the Hebrew only uses pronouns, וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו (he

9 The phrase is used by Jerome Walsh, although he does not himself agree with this assessment of the text (Walsh, 1996, p. 313). The view that this represents a later addition to the text from a different tradition is proposed in Gray, 1970, p. 431; Cogan, 2001, p. 472, by contrast Simon DeVries says this is an 'indispensable conclusion to the foregoing episode' (DeVries, 2003, p. 250).

10 The phrase is Robert Polzin's (Polzin, 1989, p. 6); he is arguing against such a critical view of the biblical redactor.

11 Cf. Robker, 2011, p. 650.

12 The work of Amanda Podany has shown that in far more ancient times (2300 to 1300 BCE) the kings of the Ancient Near East considered themselves to exist within an international brotherhood (Podany, 2010). Nevertheless, the word is surprising on the lips of Ahab as he refers to his enemy, and draws the reader's attention to the similarity between the kings.

13 Cf. Walsh, 1996, p. 309.

said to him). Who is speaking becomes clear shortly, but initially some doubt is raised in the speaker's mind. In response Ahab agrees to make a covenant with Ben-Hadad, but again the text leaves us in some initial doubt about who is acting, simply reading וַיִּכְרָת־לוֹ בְּרִית (he made a covenant with him).

> It is as if Ahab's decision to treat Ben-Hadad as a peer has eroded any distinguishing features of the two monarchs. (Walsh, 1996, p. 309)

If Walsh is correct, these devices are extending the parallels which we have already noted, and are beginning to hint at the blurring of the distinction altogether between the two kings, and the two nations.

The artful ambiguity of the passage is more clearly seen when the variety of English translations are considered. For example, Simon DeVries understands the whole of verse 34 to be Ben-Hadad's words and initiative, translating it:

> 'The cities which my father took from your father I shall return. And you shall establish bazaars for yourself in Damascus, just like my father established in Samaria. And I shall release you from the vassal-treaty.' So he made a treaty with him and sent him away. (DeVries, 2003, p. 243)

The most telling phrase of all, however, is in the mouth of the unnamed prophet who is tasked with confronting Ahab with his failure. Ahab is told (v. 42) that his life and his people are forfeit in exchange for Ben-Hadad's: נַפְשְׁךָ תַּחַת נַפְשׁוֹ וְעַמְּךָ תַּחַת עַמּוֹ 'your life in the place of his life, your people in the place of his people'. The word תַּחַת, as used here, carries the clear implication of like-for-like substitution, as seen also in Exodus 21:23 and Leviticus 24:18. In other words, distinct though Ahab may like to believe his actions and attitudes have been, he is so closely identified with Ben-Hadad that he is subject to the same judgment. Likewise, the nations, brought into the conflict by their leaders, stand subject to identical fates.

The prophet's strategy is striking. Like Nathan in a previous generation (II Samuel 12), rather than directly condemning the king, he tells a story which invites the king to condemn himself. Duped by the prophet's cunning, the king listens to the story, judges the action, and then discovers that the story was criticising him all along.

The narrator has carefully set up the nation of Aram, within this text, to act as a foil to Israel. The careful pairing of speeches, characters and narrative scenes invites us to see Aram as the unwise, ungodly counterpart to Israel.

However, once the narrator has tricked us into believing that this a simple comparison of good Israel with bad Aram, and to passing judgment on the evil

nation, he suddenly, like the prophet, whisks the mask off and declares, as it were, 'you [Israel] are that nation!'[14]

To conclude this analysis of I Kings 20: we have shown that by means of a number of literary devices, including several elements with seriocomic force, Aram is repeatedly satirised in the text, particularly through the characterization of its king as an acquisitive, overweening drunkard, who takes bad advice and returns to his folly. However, by the artful use of some narrative techniques, in particular the device of mirroring and the role of the unnamed prophet, the narrator turns the tables and suddenly we see, set alongside Ben-Hadad, the equally foolish form of Ahab, shoulder to shoulder, brothers in folly. If we laugh at the one, we must laugh at both.

We turn now to the second of the two key texts which help us to understand the relationship between Israel and Aram.

The Blinding of the Aramean Soldiers and the Siege of Samaria

II Kings 6:8–7:20 is an extended section comprising two separate stories, the second of which is divided into two sub-plots. Robert LaBarbera has conducted a detailed analysis of this passage, and we will adopt his terminology for the sections as we consider it.

The first (6:8–23, 'Story A') is the overtly humorous tale of the soldiers struck blind, 'led up the garden path' by the very man they are seeking, and then feasted by their enemy.

As the curtain rises on the second passage (6:24–7:20; 'Story B'), Israel and Aram are again at loggerheads, with the army of Ben-Hadad besieging the city of Samaria. Indeed, the siege has been so prolonged that starvation and desperation (and cannibalism) are setting in.

As has been discussed previously, Stuart Lasine (1991) has identified within this second narrative elements of grotesque humour and inversion/subversion which, he argues, serve to throw doubt upon the integrity of the prophet and his God. It is my argument that these narrative devices are part of a larger design to establish multiple parallelisms and satirical comparisons within the text.

Thus within Story A, the blindness of the soldiers of Aram acts as a foil for the blindness of Elisha's servant. So the servant is unable to see (ראה) the supernatural army until Elisha prays that his eyes be opened יְהוָה פְּקַח־נָא אֶת־עֵינָיו וְיִרְאֶה (v. 17). Then the approaching soldiers are struck blind (v. 18) and are unable to see (ראה) until Elisha prays again, in identical words, יְהוָה פְּקַח אֶת־עֵינֵי־אֵלֶּה וְיִרְאוּ (v. 20).

14 Cf. II Samuel 12:7.

In Story B, as Lasine has shown, the subplot of the cannibal mothers highlights the impotence of the king of Israel, and perhaps the carelessness of the prophet. However, Lasine reads only the first half of this second narrative, stopping at 6:33. This is a rich and complex text, however, and some of the elements of satire and parallelism only become clear when a larger view is taken of the text. Thus, later on in the story, the four lepers direct our laughter (using a homonymic pun[15]) back to the Arameans, fleeing from מְצֹרָעִים (lepers) rather than from מִצְרַיִם (Egyptians) (LaBarbera, 1984).

So we have multiple examples of *intra*-narrative parallelism and satire.[16]

Additionally, however, Robert LaBarbera has helpfully demonstrated some of the *inter*-narrative parallels between Stories A and B, and hence between Aram and Israel. His schema for the comparison is as follows (adapted from LaBarbera, 1984, p. 650):

1. The king consults his servants (עֲבָדָיו) about a military problem.
   Story A = 6:11a—The king of Aram: the problem is Israel's foreknowledge of the raids.
   Story B = 7:12—The king of Israel: the problem is the meaning of the deserted camp.
2. The king misunderstands the situation.
   Story A = 6:11b—The king of Aram thinks one of his people is a traitor.
   Story B = 7:12b—The king of Israel thinks the empty camp is a trap.
3. One of his servants (אַחַד מֵעֲבָדָיו) gives a pertinent suggestion:
   Story A = 6:12—A servant suggests to the king of Aram that the informant is Elisha the prophet.
   Story B = 7:13—A servant suggests to the king of Israel that he might as well send a scouting party.
4. The king sends (וַיִּשְׁלַח) a chariot (רֶכֶב) and horses (סוּסִים), and commands his people to go and see (לְכוּ וּרְאוּ);
   Story A = 6:13–14—The king of Aram sends to capture Elisha.
   Story B = 7:14–15—The king of Israel sends to reconnoitre the camp of Aram.

However, while LaBarbera helpfully demonstrates the anti-establishment 'peasant' themes within the texts (the total failure of military power; the impotence of the kings of Aram and Israel, the success of the common peo-

15 Cf. Heim, 2008, p. 925.

16 An 'intra-narrative' parallel compares events or characterizations found within the limits of that narrative. It contrasts with an 'inter-narrative' parallel which compares events or characterizations found in different narratives.

ple), he has not made as much of this parallelism that he has demonstrated between the two nations as he might have.

Having been sensitised by previous texts to the possibility of Aram mirroring Israel, to Israel's detriment, we can detect a similar effect taking place here.

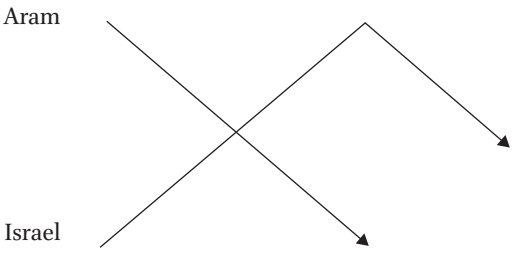
Both narratives reach their climax with the retreat of the Aramean army. Story A shows the Arameans in a foolish light: they have gone out to battle, armed to the teeth, and been feasted by the very enemy they sought to capture and defeat. But at the end it is the stammering paralysis of the king of Israel which catches our attention (6:21).

> Shall I strike them, shall I strike them, my father?

The hasty retreat of the Aramean army in Story B also makes us laugh at them, fleeing before shadows—until the narrative shows us, again, the indecision of the king of Israel (7:12).

> Let me tell you what the Arameans are doing to us. They know we are starving, so they have gone out from the camp to hide themselves in the open country, saying: When they come out from the camp, we will seize them alive and enter the city.

Both times the 'victory' is handed on a plate to the king of Israel; it is none of his own making. Neither time does he know how to respond. Once again, the text draws us in, invites us to laugh at Aram, and then shifts the object of our mockery to Israel herself. In terms of the trajectory of the text, it is similar to what we observed in 1 Kings 20. Aram seems initially to be bettered, but the last laugh is against Israel.



In conclusion, careful analysis of these paired texts reveals a multiplicity of parallels, which draw the reader's attention to the comparison between Aram and Israel, and between their kings. Once again, while Aram appears initially

to be the textual object of scorn, it is Israel who draws our attention by the end of the passage. The last laugh[17] is always on Israel. It appears that the narrative itself is once again functioning towards the reader in the same way that the words of the unnamed prophet from 1 Kings 20 function towards the king of Israel. It tells us a tale, draws our scorn or mirth, and then deflects it to its true object—Israel and its king.

The sting in the tail of both of these narratives is very seriocomic in fashion, with its carnivalesque leaning towards reversal and inversion. In this genre, there are no clear distinctions between wise and foolish, the good and the evil, faithful and faithless. The wise may act foolishly, or the foolish wisely; the good may suddenly behave reprehensibly, and so on. Recalling that seriocomic genre can function both to subvert or to invert, the overall effect here, notwithstanding the plentiful *inversions* within the narrative, is to *subvert* our approval of Israel. Far from being the exemplar to the pagan nations that she is called to be, she frequently falls below the standards that even they set. No monologic truth emerges, and no nation is revealed as faithful to YHWH,[18] but the truth about the failings of both Aram and Israel emerges in the dialogue between them.

Use of Pagan Nations to Critique Israel?

Use of the pagan nations to critique Israel, and indeed Judah, is not unprecedented within the rest of the Hebrew Bible. The book of Amos, for instance, begins with a series of oracles directed against the pagan nations around Israel, including Aram (Amos 1:3):

> Thus says YHWH, 'For three sins of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke [the judgment]'.

Having addressed Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab in this way, Amos then addresses Judah and Israel in identical terms.

> Thus says YHWH, 'For three sins of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke [the judgment]' (Amos 2:6).

Similarly, Israel is directly likened to the Arameans and other pagan nations in Amos 9:7.

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17 And therefore the best laugh—see the quotation which opened the chapter.

18 The view which the text takes of Judah will be considered shortly.

> Are you sons of Israel not like the sons of Cush to me?—the decree of YHWH. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and Aram from Kir?

In historical terms, the ultimate fate of Israel and Aram is very similar, and this is of course reflected in the text. II Kings 16:9 shows the Assyrians defeating Damascus and killing the Aramean king. Just a few verses later, an almost identical fate befalls Israel (17:4–6).

This is consistent with the predominant theological idea in Isaiah 17:1–3, where the fates of the two nations are explicitly compared.

> A burden against Damascus:
> Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city, and the city will become a ruin.
> The cities of Aroer[19] are abandoned; they will be for flocks;
> they will lie down, and there will be none to startle them.
> And the fortified city will disappear from Ephraim
> and the kingdom from Damascus.
> Aram is a remnant, like the glory that the sons of Israel are.
> The decree of YHWH of hosts.

So the narrative of Kings draws our attention to the similarities between Aram and Israel in a vein which is consistent with other parts of the Hebrew Bible, but uses the less conventional device of the seriocomic genre. Far from being ethically and monotheistically distinct from her pagan neighbour, Israel is shown to share, and sometimes to exceed, Aram's follies.

Extension of the Critique to Judah

The burden of this critique does not remain solely at the door of Israel, however. The finger of accusation, which has pointed from Aram to Israel, now turns to Judah. The narrative uses a number of techniques to extend the comparison between Aram and Israel to Judah itself; we will examine these in turn.

Binding the Three Nations Together

We have already noted that the Command-Prophecy formula proleptically introduces revolution in both Israel and Aram. In fact, however, when this plays out later in the text, the accession of Jehu leads to the overthrow not just

19 Aroer is a city in Moab.

of the king of Israel, but of the king of Judah also.[20] In this way, the affairs of the three nations appear to be closely bound to one another, with national politics in all three being triggered by the Command-Prophecy, thus:

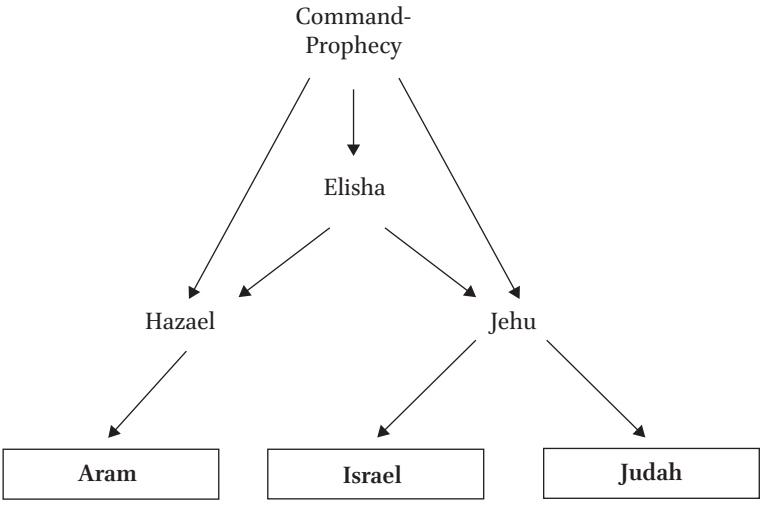

FIGURE 8 *Relationship of Jehu, Hazael and Elisha following the Command-Prophecy.*

Pollution of the House of Judah with Omride Blood

Israel and Judah are bound more tightly still, however, by the blood ties which mingle the royal lines of both kingdoms. In 1 Kings 21, following Jezebel's judicial murder of Naboth on Ahab's behalf, Elijah speaks a judgment against the house of Ahab.

> Because you have sold yourself over to do evil in the eyes of YHWH, behold, I am bringing evil upon you, and I will cause devastation to follow you. I will cut off to Ahab all that urinate against a wall, slave and free, in Israel. And I will hand over your house, like the house of Jeroboam son of Nabat and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, for the grievance with which you have grieved, and because you have caused Israel to sin. (1. 21:20–22)

20 II. 9:24,27.

As we have seen, part of the burning motivation of Jehu is the eradication of the House of Ahab (cf. II. 9:7, 25; 10:10–11), which is cast in terms of the fulfilment of this judgment.

> [Jehu] said to his aide Bidkar, 'Lift him and bring him to the tract of land of Naboth the Jezreelite. Remember you and I with the chariot teams behind Ahab his father, when YHWH lifted up this pronouncement against him. "Did I not see the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons yesterday? The decree of YHWH. I will repay it upon you on this tract of land: the decree of YHWH." So you, pick him up and bring him to the tract of land, according to the word of YHWH.' (II. 9:25–26; see also vv. 36–37)

Jehu wholly achieves this termination of Ahab's line in the Northern Kingdom (II. 10:17). However—and this is surely deeply ironical—while Jehu is busy exterminating all traces of Ahab's family in Israel, Athaliah, Ahab's daughter or sister,[21] is opportunistically taking control of the Judaean royal family (II Kings 11). From this time onwards, every king of Judah is descended from the house of Ahab.

This 'pollution' of the royal house of Judah is perhaps best demonstrated with a family tree:

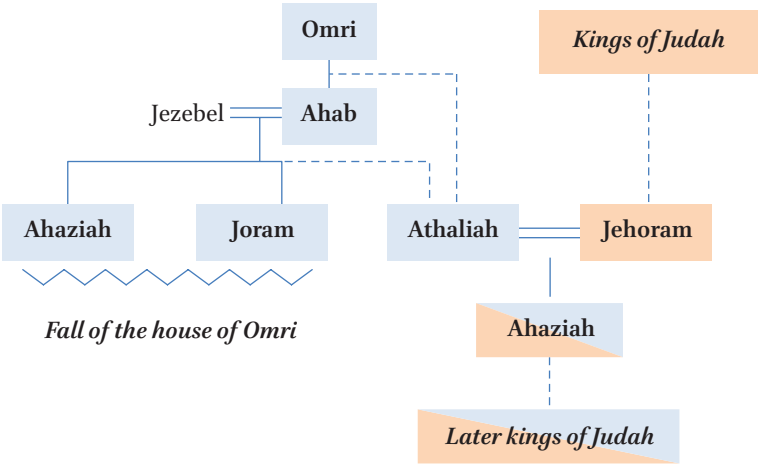

FIGURE 9 *Family tree showing Omride blood in Judah.*

21 The text is unclear about the exact relationship; cf., II. 8:18 and v. 26. Chronological and source-critical considerations have led most modern scholars to accept that she was the sister of Ahab and the daughter of Omri (Thiel, 1996).

So despite Jehu's fanatical purges in the north, Ahab's house, with all its ethical flaws, has turned up in Judah. This means that the judgment on Ahab, pertaining to all his descendants (1. 21:21–22), becomes applied to the house of Judah (Sweeney, 2007, p. 12).

The structure of the text appears designed to emphasise this. We noted earlier how the demise of Jehu is 'suspended' in the text between his death at the end of II Kings 10 and his son's succession at the beginning of chapter 13. The intervening sections narrate these events: the coup of Athaliah and her subsequent downfall; and the accession of Joash, direct descendent of Ahab.

Athaliah Paralleling Jezebel

It will not escape the reader that Athaliah, Jezebel's daughter or sister-in-law, bears many points of resemblance to Ahab's queen; it is also striking that many of the points of similarity between the women are communicated through seriocomic features of the text, such as *motifs* of profanation, inversion, the grotesque and the scatological. Their points of similarity are itemised below.

- Both are foreign queens. Jezebel is a Sidonian (1. 16:31); Athaliah is from Israel (II. 8:18).
- Both are devoted to Baal. Jezebel's devotion to Baal is demonstrated in I Kings 18:4 and 19:1–2; Athaliah's worship of Baal is clearer in Chronicles (II Chr. 24:7), but evident in the Kings narrative from the anti-Baal purge which spontaneously erupts on her death (II. 11:18).
- Both are unafraid to use violence to achieve their own ends. Jezebel is the instrument of persecution against YHWH's prophets in 1. 18:4, and her ruthlessness against Naboth in I Kings 21 is further evidence of her brutality; Athaliah kills the entire royal family in II Kings 11:1–3.
- Both are struck down at the hands of their own subjects. Jezebel in II. 9:33, Athaliah in 11:15–16.
- Both precede their death with strident words of defiance. Jezebel: 'Is it peace, you Zimri, murderer of your master?' (II. 9:31); Athaliah: 'Treason, treason!' (II. 11:14).
- Both are violently slain outside their palace: Jezebel in I Kings 9:31–35; Athaliah in II Kings 11:16.
- Jezebel is trampled by horses (II. 9:33) and Athaliah dies at the horses' entrance to the palace (II. 11:16).
- The death of both queens is followed by a purge of the temples of Baal (Jezebel in II. 10:18–27; Athaliah in 11:18).

Many of these similarities have been identified by R. Gallaher Branch, who adds that Athaliah 'dies in a barnyard setting among animal refuse' (Branch, 2004, p. 555). The association of Jezebel with dung is even more explicit (II. 9:37).[22]

Thus the narrative of events in the Northern Kingdom is interrupted with chapters 11 and 12 which show how the house of Ahab is conducting itself in the Southern Kingdom; the sins are recurring here, we discover, and the judgment will extend south.

This is made clear later in the book of Kings. We have already seen that the fate of Aram prefigures the fate of Israel in II Kings 16:9 and 17:4–6. However, the commentary that interprets the exile of Israel in II Kings 17:7–23 makes further explicit links with Judah at the same time. Thus:

> YHWH admonished Israel and Judah by the hand of every prophet. (v. 13)
> YHWH was very angry with Israel and he removed them from his presence; nothing remained but the tribe of Judah alone. But also Judah did not listen to the commands of YHWH their God, but they walked in the customs which Israel had done. (vv. 18–19)

Other Comparisons of Judah with the House of Ahab

Marvin Sweeney has argued that the text of Kings invites the reader to draw a comparison between Ahab in the north and the Southern Kingdom (Sweeney, 2007, pp. 11ff.). Briefly, he links the reprieve to Ahab (I Kgs 21) with the divine mercy shown to Josiah in II Kings 22:11–20. He suggests that Solomon's many foreign wives and idolatry (I. 3:1–2; 7:8; 9:16; 11:1) provide a foreshadowing of Ahab's own alien marriage and Baal worship in I Kings 21:25–26 (Sweeney, 2007, p. 12). Finally, he argues that Zedekiah's capture in Jericho can be seen to revisit the rebuilding of this key city of the conquest during the time of Omri (I. 16:34), marking both the beginning of Israel's possession of the land and the final blow to her possession of it (Sweeney, 2007, p. 13).

Several other writers have postulated the presence of other parallels between the house of Judah and various elements of the house of Israel, and we will now consider these in turn.

Comparing David and Ahab

David Damrosch has outlined a number of points of comparison between Ahab's house in II Kings 9–10 and David's house in the aftermath of Tamar's

22 Indeed, the very name 'Jezebel' appears to carry implications of 'dung', at least in the way that it was been pointed by the Masoretes. Cf., Gray, 1970, p. 368; García-Treto, 1990, p. 63 n.9.

rape in II Samuel 13:30–33 (Damrosch, 1987, pp. 244–46). In the account of David, there is a false report that all his sons have been killed, but Jonadab reassures him that it is Amnon alone who has died. In the account of Jehu, all the sons of Ahab have indeed been killed; and Jehu is assisted in the matter by a certain Jehonadab. The name Jehonadab is a variant of Jonadab, and these are the only two characters in the Hebrew Bible of this name. Thus Damrosch argues:

> If the cunning Jonadab is an ironic echo of the zealous Jonadab/Jehonadab, David is a reduced Jehu, failing to carry out justice on his own wicked son [...] David ought to be enforcing justice, like Jehu, but at the same time, it is his own sons who are the criminals, and he is the sinning father whose crimes re-echo in the younger generation. In this respect David is parallel to Ahab as much as to Jehu, and he is paralysed by reluctance to exercise judgment against his own household. (Damrosch, 1987, p. 245)

The association between Ahab and David is strengthened, Damrosch adds, by the fact that they are the only two monarchs to receive parables of judgment,[23] in texts which we have already compared.

If Damrosch is correct, then the house of Judah is subject to a subtle censure which reaches back as far as David himself.

Comparing David and Jeroboam

A parallelism between David and Jeroboam was identified by Frank Moore Cross in 1973, who related the twin themes in the book of Kings of judgement and hope to the positive and negative paradigms of these kings.

> David established Yahweh's sanctuary in Jerusalem [...] Jeroboam established the rival shrine of Bethel [...] David in Kings is the symbol of fidelity, Jeroboam the symbol of infidelity. (Cross, 1973, p. 282)

This phenomenon which Cross describes is something I have termed 'balanced antitypes', because David appears to be exemplary in all the ways in which Jeroboam is flawed. Thus the two kings mirror one another in a reciprocal sense. I would suggest that is by means of the disruption and subversion of this good/bad, wise/foolish antithesis that the text plays with our preconceptions

23 II Sam 12:1–15; I Kgs 20:35–43.

and confronts the nation of Judah, as we have already seen in the relationship between Aram and Israel.

Comparing Manasseh and Ahab

Such a disruption of the pattern has been described by García-Treto, whose compelling account of the Jehu narrative (II Kgs 9,10) as a piece of carnivalesque literature has already been considered. García-Treto demonstrates that the 'House of Ahab' acts as a *Leitwort* in the text, but that in so doing it becomes an 'antithetical allusion' to the House of David (García-Treto, 1990, p. 47). In particular, he focuses on the later criticism of Manasseh as behaving like Ahab and being subject to the same judgment.

García-Treto points out that throughout Kings, the touchstone of orthodoxy for the kings of Judah is David, and that for the house of Israel is Jeroboam. Thus, while the kings of Judah are positively[24] or negatively[25] compared with David, the (universally) idolatrous kings of Israel are likened to Jeroboam.[26]

For example,

> Asa did right in the eyes of YHWH, like David his father. (I. 15:11)
> Solomon did evil in the eyes of YHWH and did not wholly follow YHWH, like David his father. (I. 11:6)
> Omri did evil in the eyes of YHWH [...] for he walked in all the way of Jeroboam son of Nebat. (I. 16:25)

García-Treto shows that this pattern is broken in only two places, where—surprisingly—Ahab is used as a comparator for the kings of Judah. First, Jehoram of Judah is likened to Ahab:

> [Jehoram] went the way of the kings of Israel, doing as the house of Ahab did, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife. So he did evil in the eyes of YHWH. (II. 8:18)

Secondly, Manasseh, the king who led Judah into worse idolatry than the nations around them (II. 21:9,10), and whose sin directly resulted in the Bablyonian exile (II. 24:3) is compared to Ahab:

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24 I. 3:3; 15:11; II. 18:3; 22:2.

25 I. 11:4,6,33; 15:3; II. 14:3; 16:2.

26 I. 15:34; 16:2,19,26,31; 22:52; II. 3:3; 10:29,31; 13:2,6,11; 14:24; 15:9,18,24,28; 17:22.

> [Manasseh] rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed. And he erected altars to the Baal and he made Asherahs, as did Ahab king of Israel, and he worshipped all the host of heaven and served them. (II. 21:3)
>
> I will stretch out over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria and the plumb-line of the house of Ahab; and I will wipe clean Jerusalem as one wipes out a bowl, wiping it out and turning it upside down. (II. 21:13)

With attention to Bakhtin's methodology, García-Treto suggests that II Kings 9 and 10 is thus:

> a 'dialogic' text in which all human authority is shown relativized and open to criticism—carnivalized—both the House of Ahab and Jehu, its destroyer, but in powerful allusion, the House of David as well. (García-Treto, 1990, p. 61)

Comparing Solomon and the King of Israel

We referred in chapter 4 to the paper by Hugh Pyper which compares the narrative of the cannibal mothers in II Kings 6 to that of the two prostitutes before King Solomon in I Kings 3. Pyper argues that the northern narrative is being used to subvert our appreciation for Solomon's wisdom. 'The existence of the parody inevitably throws doubt over the 'original' story' (Pyper, 1993, p. 28).

Whether we are more persuaded by Hugh Pyper's relatively simple 'backwards reading' (Pyper, 1993) or Stuart Lasine's more sophisticated analysis of the intertextuality at play (Lasine, 1993), the similarities between the two narratives do contribute to the overall impression of a parallelism between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms which may function to the detriment of the Davidic house.

The Damascus Altar

We have seen that Aram serves as a comparator for Israel, and we have found multiple instances within the text where Israel appears to function as a comparator for Judah. A striking, and shocking, confirmation of this hypothesis is found in II Kings 16:10–18, where Judah becomes complicit in the idolatry of Aram. The chapter opened with Ahaz, king of Judah being likened to the kings of Israel:

> He did not do right in the eyes of YHWH his God as David his father. But he went the way of the kings of Israel. (II. 16:2b–3a)

As T.R. Hobbs puts it:

> The deliberate, and in the writer's mind, dangerous, behavior of the king could not have been more clearly portrayed. The writer is thus drawing a parallel between the activities of the kings in the northern nation, which by now seem to have sealed the impending fate of Israel, and the activities of the southern kings. (Hobbs, 2002, p. 211)

However, Ahaz has further to fall. Faced by the combined menace of Israel and Aram, he appeals to the Assyrians for the protection due to a vassal.

After the defeat of Damascus by Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria, Ahaz travels to the ruined city to meet his Assyrian overlord. While he is there, he notices an altar which takes his fancy. He sends a copy of its design back to Jerusalem with instructions that it be copied and used in the temple (II. 16:10). Indeed, its incorporation into the temple paraphernalia necessitates the removal of other, more legitimate, sacred objects (vv. 14,17–18).

Cogan and Tadmor's view that 'Ahaz's innovations [were] by no means idolatrous or syncretistic' and that he is criticised only because of his disruption of the established order of the YHWH cult (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 193) does not seem plausible to me, and is not shared by most commentators. It is possible that the altar was built as a token of his acceptance of the culture of his Assyrian overlord (Gray, 1970, p. 635), although the description of the cultic practice (v. 15) does not correspond to the conventions of Assyrian worship (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 192). Further, there is no suggestion within the text that the altar was adopted at the instigation of Tiglath-Pileser; rather the text emphasises Ahaz's own enthusiasm for it (Cohn, 2000, p. 113).[27]

וַיֵּלֶךְ . . . וַיַּרְא . . . וַיִּשְׁלַח

> He went [. . .] he saw [. . .] he sent. (II. 16:10)

The most plausible explanation would appear to be that Ahaz is adopting a form of worship extant in Aram, resulting in syncretism at best, and idolatry at worst. This is supported by the comment within the parallel account in II Chronicles:

---

27 This formula 'he saw [. . .] he did' carries strong associations with temptation and fall (e.g. Gen 3:6; 6:2; 12:15; 34:2; 38:2; II Sam 11:2) (Hobbs, 2002, p. 215).

> In the time of his distress, he continued to be untrue to YHWH, he—King Ahaz. For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus which had defeated him. And he said 'The gods of the kings of Aram, they helped them. To them I will sacrifice, they will help me'. (II Chr 28:22–23)

In II Kings 16, then, we see the king of Judah regress from the Davidic ideal (v. 2) to being likened to the kings of Israel (v. 3), then decline still further to syncretism with the cult of Aram (vv. 10ff.). It is ironical that he should be seduced into the sin of the very nations which are threatening him, and whose sin will shortly lead them both to the very fate which Judah is herself inescapably approaching.[28]

Conclusion

Evidence has been presented for a complex web of symmetries, pairs, mirrors and parallels between the nations of Aram, Israel and Judah. Figure 10 represents some of these visually.

This sophisticated layering of the text has not been previously identified, although some elements of the mirroring have, as indicated above. This is in part because of a preponderance of scholarly interest in the compositional history of the text, rather than in its final form. Undoubtedly the sources of the text are multiple and diverse, but reading it as a whole rather than as a collection of fragments sensitises the reader to the rich, mature strata within it.

Evidence has already been presented that this Central Section is rich in seriocomic, or carnivalesque features. We have now, in addition, identified *mises-en-abyme* within our text. The large number of cases of repetitions and similarities, as outlined above, forms a compelling cumulative burden of evidence that the text is 'self-consciously' reflexive, as set out in Dällenbach's criteria (Dällenbach, 1977, pp. 64–70).

Instances of the similarities between Elijah and Elisha, and between Aram, Israel and Judah have been identified by other commentators, as shown throughout the above analysis. However, the aggregate effect of this mirroring has not been previously identified.[29]

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28 The fall of Damascus II. 16:9; fall of Samaria II. 17:3–6; fall of Jerusalem II. 24:10–14; 25:1–21.

29 Thomas Brodie has identified a *mise-en-abyme* formed by the Elijah-Elisha narrative, which comments upon the Primary History or Genesis to Kings (Brodie, 2000). However, while he identifies 'continuity' between Elijah and Elisha, he does not develop this into an investigation of the intra-textual mirroring in their narrative.

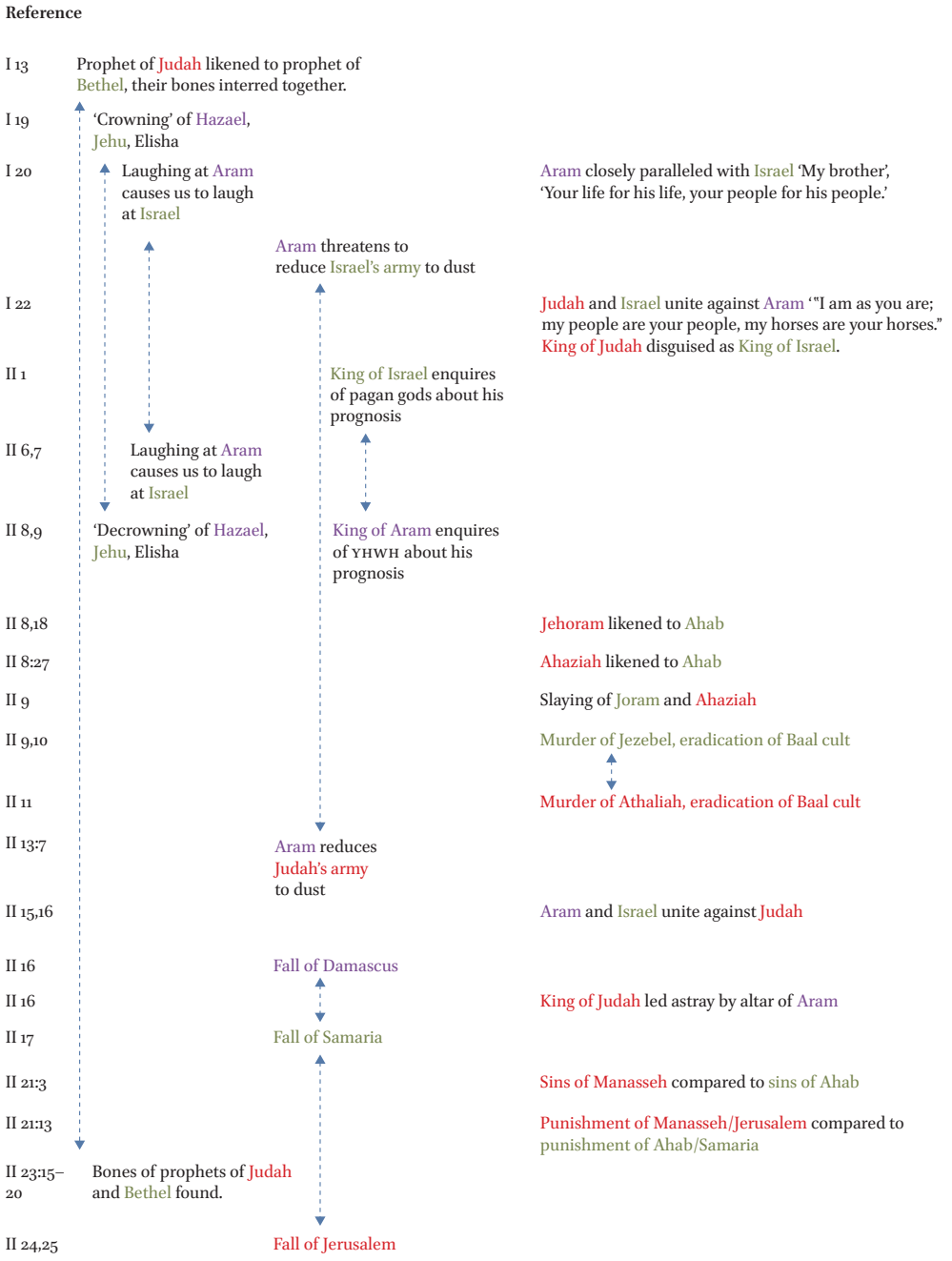

FIGURE 10 *Illustration of some of the parallels between Aram, Israel and Judah in Kings.*

Mises-en-abyme can be simple, with a single point of comment, or they can be complex, with multiple internal points of reference, and overlapping mirroring devices. The mirrors we have identified within the Central Section are of the latter type; there is not a simple one-to-one mapping of mirror and mirrored. Nonetheless, as a tool for identifying internal comment within the text, it facilitates the understanding of some of the dynamics therein.

The text repeatedly directs the reader's scorn and mirth towards Aram, but on each occasion, Nathan-like, the narrative turns and our disdain is diverted towards Israel. But multiple hints within the text invite us to draw parallels between Israel and Judah, and it is not, in the end, possible to deride the Northern Kingdom from the Southern with a sense of moral superiority.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

> [YHWH] is an equal-opportunity trapper.
>
> LEITHART, 2006, p. 180

∴

The central passages in Kings contain some of the most florid narratives in the entire Hebrew Bible. For this reason they have been beloved of preachers and Sunday-school children for generations. In particular, the prophets Elijah and Elisha have traditionally been esteemed as great men of God, dauntless in faith and unimpeachable in integrity.

Despite this, however, there are some difficult ongoing questions raised by a careful reading of Kings, not least by the characters of Elijah and Elisha themselves, which have not been fully answered by contemporary scholarship. These so-called 'enigmas' were set out in chapter 2. In brief, they related to three issues.

1. The ethical content of the actions of Elijah and Elisha, and their characterisation in the text.
2. The unexpected importance of Israel and, more surprisingly still, of the pagan nation Aram within the central section of Kings.
3. The purpose of the apparently disjunctive 'Command-Prophecy' in 1 Kings 19:15–17.

Working on the supposition that the work of Mikhail Bakhtin may provide some clues to resolving these issues, in chapter 3 I set out a proposal.

> The central section of the book of Kings contains many elements of the seriocomic genre, which function in an artful way to serve an important literary and ideological purpose within the text.

Alongside that proposal, I also established a list of diagnostic criteria for the seriocomic genre, and, drawing on the work of Yairah Amit, Melissa Jackson and others, a set of test criteria against which to evaluate it.

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In chapter 4, evidence was presented for a substantial clustering of seriocomic features at the heart of Kings. Elements identified included:

1. Violation of linguistic norms
    a. Heteroglossia
    b. Billingsgate, cursing and praise-abuse
2. Inversion of hierarchy
    a. Crowning/decrowning
3. Masking and Foolery
4. Feasting
5. Transgression of bodily barriers
    a. Scatological elements
    b. The grotesque
6. Profanation of the sacred
7. Fantasticality

In chapters 5 and 7 the effect of these seriocomic features was discussed, focusing on the subversion of the prophets, and the subversion of Aram, Israel, and Judah. It was argued that both of these effects are achieved by the use of the *mise-en-abyme* device. Chapter 6 considered the role of the Command-Prophecy to introduce and foreground the characters and nations within the central section which prove important in the development of this satire.

I have endeavoured throughout the later sections of this work to check my proposal against my pre-established criteria. In this concluding chapter I will draw together these threads, and evaluate to what extent the proposal has been substantiated.

Evaluation

In chapter 3, the following criteria were set out, aiming towards establishing reproducible and objective measures of the seriocomic genre. We will consider these criteria one at a time.

1. It must contain a clustering of diagnostic features of the Menippean genre.
2. It should offer explanations for features within the text which are otherwise difficult to explain.
3. It should demonstrate coherence with the wider text in terms of proposed genre, approach and effect.
4. It should be supported by the findings of other scholars.

Clustering of Seriocomic Features

Towards the end of chapter 4, I presented a bar chart of the seriocomic features I have identified within the text. The data from the central section of Kings is re-presented in tabular form in Figure 11.[1] In addition, the forms of atypical Hebrew identified by Gary Rendsburg in *Israelian Hebrew in the Book of Kings* (Rendsburg, 2002) are shown at the bottom of the table. As explained in chapter 4, these two sets of data are not combined into a single total, because the large numbers of linguistic deviations would obscure the smaller numbers of seriocomic features.

Clearly, the quantification of qualitative data like this is not without its problems. Take, for example, the death of Jezebel in II Kings 9:30–37. Here, I have counted four seriocomic *motifs*, as follows:

> Bloody death of Jezebel v. 33 (Grotesque)
> Jezebel as dung v. 37 (Scatological)
> Jezebel's toilette before her ignominious death vv. 30,33 (Crowning/decrowning)
> Feasting over Jezebel's body v. 34 (Feasting)

It will be apparent from this list that the single event satisfies several of the diagnostic criteria. Should it therefore be counted once, or four times? Since counting it only once would fail to demonstrate the intensity conveyed when multiple seriocomic qualities coincide, I have elected to tally it four times; counting seriocomic *features*, rather than seriocomic *events*. This is also consistent with my stated methodology of final-form textual analysis, rather than historical criticism.

Another example of subjectivity is seen when the idea of bloody or brutal death is pursued as an example of the grotesque (violation of bodily boundaries). In chapter 4, I itemised the violent deaths described in the central section of Kings, and pointed out how *en masse* they amount to a gripping and graphic display of gore. However, whether any one of them, individually, amounts to a grotesque event, is a subjective decision. In compiling the list, I have elected to designate a violent death as 'grotesque' (subsumed within the 'violation of bodily barriers' category) if the text appears to make a particular point of the death (e.g. through increased space allocation or unexpected detail), or if it takes place in an especially gruesome fashion (e.g. human sacrifice).

As stated when the graph was shown in chapter 4, another weakness of this attempted quantification is that the chapter breaks of the Hebrew Bible are arbitrary, and reflect the views of someone very much later than our exilic

1 The full list of these events is given in Appendix 2.

	I.16	I.17	I.18	I.19	I.20	I.21	I.22	II.1	II.2	II.3	II.4	II.5	II.6	II.7	II.8	II.9	II.10	II.11	II.12	II.13
Fantasticality		4	1	2	1			2	5		5	2	5							2
Profanation																	1			
Transgression of bodily boundaries	1		1		2	2	1	2	1	1			1	1	1	3	5	1		
Feasting	1	1		1	1						2		2	2	0	1				
Masking/foolery					1		2			1			2	1	1	1	1			
Hierarchical inversion	2				2	1	1					1	1	2	1	4	3	1	1	
Billingsgate			3	1	2	1	1		1	1			1			2				
Total	**4**	**5**	**5**	**4**	**9**	**4**	**5**	**4**	**7**	**3**	**7**	**3**	**12**	**6**	**3**	**11**	**10**	**2**	**1**	**2**
Atypical Hebrew as identified by Rendsburg	1	8	5	3	14	6	10	4	2	7	22	3	14	3	8	17	5	0	0	1

FIGURE 11 *Seriocomic events in the central part of Kings, by chapter.*

author. As a result, the chapters are not uniform in length, varying between 18 (1 Kings 5, 11 Kings 1) and 66 verses (1 Kings 8). This is counting by verse, not in itself a standardised unit of measurement. Nor do the chapter breaks necessarily reflect the 'correct' section breaks in the narrative, which often, of course, remain under dispute. An example of this would be, as I have argued, the way that the narrative of the Aramean siege of Samaria straddles the chapter break, running from 11 Kings 6:24 to the end of chapter 7.

For these reasons, the plotting of a bar chart of seriocomic features by chapter is a necessarily imprecise exercise. Nonetheless, it provides a visual impression of the number and frequency of the features. According to the tally I have performed, there are 107 seriocomic features found between the beginning of 1 Kings 16 and the end of 11 Kings 13. I estimate that there are a maximum of fourteen[2] in the remainder of the book. In assessing the remainder of the book of Kings, I have attempted to set the lowest possible threshold for diagnosing a seriocomic feature, in order to make my hypothesis as hard to confirm as possible. In fact, I would defend very few of these as genuinely seriocomic (the exceptions being in 1 Kgs 13 and 14; which is also, interestingly, a text which is northern in focus).

It is therefore my argument that seriocomic features can be considered to have occurred in sufficient numbers within the central section to verify my proposal, with regard to my first criterion.

Accounting for Difficulties in the Text

My second criterion was that the proposed hermeneutic should help to answer some of the ongoing questions which the text raises, although as we have seen, these are often not noted. As summarised above, these difficulties arise from the prominence of Aram and Israel within the central part of Kings; the way in which the prophets, especially Elijah and Elisha, are portrayed; and the purpose of the so-called Command-Prophecy formula in its apparently surprising setting.

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2 The fourteen cases are: 1. 1:17—possible deceit of David (masking?); 1. 2:8–9—broken promise (masking?); I. 3:20–21—exchanged identities of the babies (masking?); 1. 13:4–5—withered hand and split altar (fantastical), v. 8—insult (linguistic transgression), v. 18—deceit (masking?), v. 25—lion does the will of God (fantastical); 1. 14:2—disguise (masking?), v. 11—scatological insult (linguistic transgression, transgression of bodily boundaries); 11. 14:9–10—insult (linguistic transgression?); 11. 20:11—shadow retreats ten steps (fantastical?); 11 Kgs 21—Jerusalem described as full of blood (grotesque?); 11 Kgs 23—defilement of multiple altars (profanation).

My hermeneutic allows us to understand the ethical questions around the actions of Elijah and Elisha as something more than an embarrassment. We recall that some have seen their inclusion to be accidental, and to serve no theological or narrative purpose (e.g. Gray, 1970, pp. 28–29). However, the reading I have proposed allows us to understand these narratives, not only as humorous or intriguing in their own right, but also as key threads in a nuanced, complex fabric of texts, woven together by a master story-teller whose subtlety perhaps exceeds that of the scholars who consider him naïve.

Likewise, the question of the prominence of Aram in the central section of Kings, an issue which I have not found to be under discussion in the scholarly literature, is answered by observing the way that the nation functions as a literary device to highlight the flaws of Israel. The ambivalence with which Aram is treated, another puzzling question, is addressed by remembering that in a seriocomic text we would expect nothing and no one to be wholly criticised or wholly approved.

The surprising occurrence of the Command-Prophecy formula (1. 19:15–17) is also partly illuminated by the hermeneutic I have described. Once again, rather than being out of place (cf. Montgomery & Gehman, 1951, pp. 314–15; Cogan, 2001, p. 547), these verses can be seen to have both a structural purpose, in establishing an *inclusio*; and—linked to this—a narrative purpose in presenting and accentuating key themes.

The second issue I raised about these verses remains unresolved, however. I questioned why the text does not show us the fulfilment of this prophecy—at least in terms which correlate closely to the manner of the command. So Elijah does not anoint any of the three, although of course, by appointing Elisha as his successor, he catalyses revolutions, not only in Aram and Israel, but also in Judah. Likewise, with regard to the promised purge against Baalism (1. 19:18): Elisha shows no enthusiasm for the matter; Hazael is not shown to be involved in this; and Jehu's initial zeal for YHWH soon peters out (11. 10:29–31). Indeed, if I were reading this as a modern text, I would conclude that Jehu's fervour is rather more politically than theologically motivated.

Of course this unfulfilled prophecy, if that is what this is, is not the only instance of the phenomenon in the central part of Kings. We have already considered the deceptive words of the prophet Micaiah (1 Kgs 22), and the incompletely fulfilled prophecy of Elisha (11 Kgs 3). It may be that even this is an instance of seriocomic masking, where truth is revealed through concealment, opacity and tricks. In the concluding part of this chapter I will briefly consider the question of whether YHWH himself is shown to be a trickster in the seriocomedy.

Additionally, the failure of a prophecy can be attributed, at least in part, to human fallibility. So Marvin Sweeney says of the unfulfilled prophecy of II Kings 3:

> Israel/ J[]oram—and not YHWH—would be responsible for the failure to achieve victory over the Moabites. The scenario provides a parallel to the wilderness tradition—for example, the Israelite spies refused to accept YHWH's guarantees of victory and suffered as a result. (Sweeney, 2007, p. 284)

With regard to the Command-Prophecy, the human disobedience is perhaps spelled out more clearly, as has been identified by Jerome Walsh.

> The verb 'anoint' is unexpected [. . .] The narrator may be using the word loosely as a synonym for 'install in office,' but it will also give him the opportunity to show Elijah acting at odds with Yahweh's command by designating Elisha as prophet without anointing him. (Walsh, 1996, p. 278)

So the verses appear to bring an element of ambiguity with them; ambiguity about the faithfulness of Elijah in obeying the instructions, uncertainty about the obedience of Elisha, Jehu and Hazael in enacting the anti-Baal purge, and even a question about whether the word of YHWH might have failed. It would seem that some of the issues which have proved puzzling about the Command-Prophecy are explained when we understand the seriocomic nature of the text.

Coherence—Comparison with the Overall Theology of Kings

The book of Kings is widely regarded as having a mainly Judaean focus of interest, being highly critical of the northern kingdom's infidelity (worship of other gods) and cultic deviance (worship of YHWH in proscribed places). This is not to say that Kings is uncritical of Judah, but it is less scathing and sweeping in its condemnation of the southern kingdom. Thus the book provides a theodicy for the exiles of both nations, while offering a faint light of hope, based upon YHWH's covenant promise to David. The theme of the word of God brought through the prophets is considered to be important.

How consistent are my findings with the overall theology of the book? By its very nature, the identification of a thread of subversion within a text will 'unsay' something that the main thread of the text is saying. Thus, if my reading were entirely consistent with the prevailing theology of Kings, it could not be satirical. Nonetheless, if it were to bring an interpretation which was wholly

inconsistent, this would pose serious questions about the validity of the novel interpretation.

So in identifying the seriocomic nature of these texts, we anticipate that they will not function wholly to endorse or wholly to censure any one character or point of view. As repeatedly stated, Bakhtin's understanding is that seriocomic texts serve both a destructive and a reconstructive effect. The subversion, decrowning, insults and mockery also permit new possibilities to emerge, the rebirth and regeneration of fresh opportunities (e.g. Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 217). Hence insults are combined with compliments, crowning is followed by decrowning, degradation is linked with merriment. So we should expect the text's assumptions, conventions and metanarratives to be questioned, mocked, played with, but not utterly discarded.

Thus, in chapter 5 I argued that the prophets are being satirised by the text. However, this critique is not unambiguous. Clearly, for example, Elijah performs a deed of extraordinary courage and faith on Carmel. Likewise, the way that Elisha is repeatedly designated 'the man of God' (e.g. II. 4:25; 5:8) is only partly undermined by the critical representation I have described. Both prophets are associated with what to the modern reader seems to be staggering brutality (e.g. II. 1:10,12; 2:23–25) and yet with extraordinary life-giving (e.g. I. 17:17–24; II. 4:11–37). Their greatest moments reveal their weakness: Elijah flees to Horeb after the confrontation at Carmel (I Kgs 19); Elisha fails to revivify the child at his first (by proxy) attempt (II. 4:29–31).

The conventional understanding of Elijah and Elisha, approved by generations of reading traditions back at least as far as the New Testament writers,[3] should not be discarded. But there are additional strata or sub-currents within the text which at the same time destabilise, critique and call into question the unequivocal positivity of the image. As we shall see shortly, the freedom of YHWH is an important theme of the seriocomedy, and perhaps the representation of his prophets as fallible men who may mis-hear or disobey contributes to this effect.

Similarly, although the nation of Judah in the central section is critiqued, its moral superiority to Israel is also implicit. For example, it is Jehoshaphat of Judah who seeks the guidance of YHWH in I Kings 22, while his Israelian counterpart is more interested in having his own wishes endorsed.

We have seen that in seriocomic writing, multiple voices are brought into apposition with one another:

3 E.g. Matthew 14:13–21 (cf. II. 4:42–44); Matt 17:1–13.

> The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth, and it is also counterposed to the naïve self-confidence of those people who think that they know something, that is, who think that they possess certain truths. Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. Socrates called himself a 'pander'[4]: he brought people together and made them collide in a quarrel, and as a result truth was born. (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 110, emphasis original)

Bakhtin is probably referring, at least in part, to Xenophon's Συμποσιον, where Socrates describes his pride in his own role as μαστροπός (procurer), and then praises one of his fellow diners for being likewise gifted as a προαγωγός (go-between):

> Σὺ δὲ δή, ἔφη ὁ Καλλίας, ἐπὶ τίνι μέγα φρονεῖς, ὦ Σώκρατες; καὶ ὃς μάλα σεμνῶς ἀναspάσας τὸ πρόσωπον, ἐπὶ *μαστροπείᾳ*, εἶπεν. (chapter 3.10)

> 'You then,' said Callias, 'of what are you proud, Socrates?' He, composing his face solemnly, replied, 'Of procuring'.

> ταῦτα οὖν ὁρῶν δυνάμενόν σε ποιεῖν ἀγαθὸν νομίζω *προαγωγὸν* εἶναι. ὁ γὰρ οἷός τε ὢν γιγνώσκειν τε τοὺς ὠφελίμους αὑτοῖς καὶ τούτους δυνάμενος ποιεῖν ἐπιθυμεῖν ἀλλήλων. (chapter 4.64)

> Therefore, seeing what you are able to achieve, I deem you an excellent go-between. He who can recognise their mutual usefulness and is able to cause them to desire each other.

In other words, Socrates (and the seriocomic literary form) brings together those who might shed mutual light on one another. Is this a feature which we can identify within our text?

I would argue that the voices[5] of Elijah and Elisha are brought together in the text, along with those of others—Obadiah (the prophet of 1 Kgs 18), perhaps Moses, and so on. These voices contrast, clash, compare, and comment

4 This term is unfamiliar in contemporary English usage; it refers to a pimp or procurer and derives from the go-between *Pandaros* in the story of Troilus and Criseyde.

5 By 'voice' I am not referring simply to the spoken words a character is given within the text, but the effect which he has, the story which his character tells.

upon one another. Thus the staunch anti-Baalism of Elijah highlights Elisha's indifference to Naaman's prospective idolatry; conversely Elisha's preoccupation with his reputation causes us to probe Elijah's own motivations.

Likewise, the nations of Aram, Israel (pre- and post-coup) and Judah provide polyphony within the text. What is fascinating about this is that, at the time of final redaction—assuming an exilic date for this—the nations of Aram and Israel are spent forces. Both have been exiled and, consequently, 'lost' long before our text reached its final form. If my proposal about the function of Aram and Israel is correct, then what the compiler is doing is Socratic pandering in a most sophisticated form; he is bringing voices from the past to interrogate, critique and comment on Judah's recent history and current situation.[6]

Such polyvalency is not to be understood as a lack of coherence. One might almost say that the prevalent truth of this part of Kings is that no human authority controls the truth.

Comparison with the Work of Other Scholars

The fourth criterion which I set out in chapter 3, is that the hermeneutic should not be wholly idiosyncratic, but should be supported by the work of other scholars. I have endeavoured throughout this book to demonstrate the points of agreement and dissonance with contemporary scholarship, so these will be summarised only briefly here, and the focus of this section will be those scholars whose work supports my own.

Seriocomic features have previously been identified in parts of my wider text by Francisco García-Treto (II Kgs 9 and 10), Hugh Pyper and Stuart Lasine (II. 6:24–33). More broadly, the subversive effects of parts of the text (II. 6:8–7:20) have been pointed out by Robert LaBarbera and Walter Brueggemann. The evidence I found for heteroglossia owes a great deal to the meticulous linguistic analysis of Gary Rendsburg, although his conclusions differ from my own. The role of Israel as a negative comparator to Judah, extending beyond Israel's own exile by means of the Ahab-Athaliah blood ties, was first noted by Marvin Sweeney. The less-than-idealised representation of the prophets is a theme which appears to be gathering steam with a number of contemporary scholars; among them Russell Gregory (1990), Mary Shields (1993), Gershon Hepner (2003), David Marcus (1995), and in the most fully developed form, Wesley Bergen's *Elisha and the End of Prophetism* (1999).

So my reading of the central section of Kings is not entirely idiosyncratic. This, of course, begs the converse question: does the use of a seriocomic

6 This, too, is consistent with our understanding of Dtr's priority to explain the causes of the exile, without exculpating either Judah or Israel (Noth, 1981, pp. 89ff.).

hermeneutic add anything to the understanding of the text, if so many elements have been described by other scholars?

First, reading the text with attention to possible seriocomic features sensitises the reader to those subversive elements which are partially concealed. Of course this brings the inherent danger of 'reading the features in', but the checks provided by the requirement of clustering and coherence help to mitigate this possibility. So, for example, reading the narrative of Elisha and the bears, with the idea that the text need not wholly endorse the prophet's actions, frees the reader to ask questions which have, perhaps, hitherto seemed disrespectful.

While some of the seriocomic elements have been identified before, the scope and effect of the seriocomic features I have discovered have not been previously described. I believe that I am the first to have identified the seriocomic effect of the following: the incidents of insults and unusual speech patterns; the cumulative weight of the violent deaths; the Fools and liars within the text, and most of the unexpected feasts. The role of Aram has not even been questioned in any literature I have read. The mirroring effect between the three nations Aram, Israel and Judah is also a new finding, as is the way in which the text inverts at the end of the two main Aram narratives to turn the criticism upon Israel instead.

I would argue that it is identifying the seriocomic genre within the text, in addition to the *mises-en-abyme*, which gives an overall coherence to the individual findings of the aforementioned scholars, in addition to my own discoveries.

Humour in Kings?

In chapter 1, I posited that humour allows expression of certain truths which would otherwise be too difficult or too disturbing to communicate. While I have throughout the bulk of this volume used the term *seriocomic* as a technical one to describe a particular genre of writing, it should not be forgotten that the word was adopted by Bakhtin (the original term is the Greek σπουδογέλοιος) to demonstrate that this form of writing is at once both serious and comic.

Comic elements of the text have been shown throughout. Even when the narrator is describing unspeakable events, the floridity, hyperbole and clowning which accompany them imbue them with a certain dark humour. Are we supposed to laugh? Probably, at times. Personally, I find the narrative of the soldiers of Aram being literally blind-sided by Elisha highly amusing; indeed, it was this text which provoked in my mind the initial enquiry which resulted in this research. Similarly, we are probably intended to chuckle (at Elisha's

impertinence, II. 3:14), snigger (at the drunken instructions of Ben-Hadad, maybe; I. 20:18), or snort (for example, at the hubris of Elisha in II. 6:18).

But these comedic incidents serve a very serious purpose; exploring the morality of the prophets and investigating the relative merits of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. They provoke the sophisticated reader to have an open mind, to be free to re-evaluate metanarratives, be suspicious of dogmatism, and mistrust monologic representations of truth. The seriocomic form, in this author's hands, is a device to dig deeper into a reality which is often hidden beneath structures of power and tradition.

Is YHWH a Player in the Carnival?

One of the questions which my hypothesis invites is whether YHWH himself is a 'player' in the carnival. In other words, within the textual world created by the author, is YHWH represented as having a part to play in the carnival, or is he aloof from it?

I can find no evidence that YHWH is ever the subject of ridicule within our text. Certainly Baal is mocked (I. 18:27–29); the false prophets of YHWH are mocked (I. 22:10–12); even the true prophets of YHWH are satirised, as we have already seen. In this last regard, however, we note that it is partly by means of their very lack of their attentiveness to YHWH that the text mocks them. So YHWH himself is never ridiculed by the author.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that YHWH is a player in the carnival, inasmuch as it is he, sometimes, who is orchestrating the mockery. There are two elements to this satire, which we will consider in turn.

First, there is the silence of YHWH. We have already noted that many of Elisha's miracles are not performed in the name of God. As we have discussed previously, this should surprise the reader. Meir Sternberg has written of the function of 'gapping' (the artful omission of expected information) within a narrative (Sternberg, 1985, pp. 231–64), and as we saw in chapter 5, the absence of the name of YHWH from these narratives should be inferred to be intentional and artful.

Of course, YHWH is not the only silent god in the narrative. The silence, or absence, of Baal from the Carmel confrontation is one of the most dramatic moments in the book. By contrast, when he is invoked by Elijah, YHWH responds instantly with fire. Yet as the story continues, and we follow the disillusioned prophet to Horeb, YHWH seems more reluctant to reveal himself. Far from appearing in theophany as he did to Moses in the same place (Exodus 3), he is very explicitly (the text tells us three times, I. 19:11–12) *not* present in the

thaumaturgical elements. This God who has revealed himself to be dangerous and free in times past (e.g. Lev. 10:1–2; II Sam. 6:6–7) now reasserts himself as free to reveal or conceal; free to be silent or communicative. The Solomonic attempt to neuter him (cf. Brueggemann, 2001b, pp. 21–38) is revealed as quite inadequate. Unlike Baal, who does not reply because he *can* not, YHWH does not speak, at times, because he *will* not. He is free and asserts his freedom.

Discourse analysts have shown how silence within a text can be an artful means of communication. For example, Thomas Huckin has described five types of textual silence,[7] of which speech-act silence is the most relevant for our purpose (Huckin, 2002). Here, the writer intends silence to be perceived as having communicative relevance, based on shared expectations between the writer and the reader. So the silence of YHWH within our text can be understood to be a loud, pointed act of communication. Whether it is the silence of disapproval, of boredom, of irritation or of mockery, we are left to deduce.[8]

The second element of YHWH's participation in the carnival, is that of his involvement in trickery and deceit. In chapter 4, we identified a number of instances where YHWH appears to be complicit in hoodwinking nations and individuals. Briefly, those instances are

- Luring Ahab to his doom by sending a lying spirit (I Kgs 22).
- Possible visual hallucination on the battle field (II. 3:22).
- Auditory hallucination on the battle field (II. 7:6).

In addition, the complicity of YHWH when his servant seems to deceive remains a possibility left open by the text.

- Misleading the blind soldiers of Aram (II. 6:19).
- Lying to the dying Ben-Hadad (II. 8:10–14).
- The deceit of Jehu in annihilating the worshippers of Baal (II. 10:19–25).

The concern that YHWH might be seen as culpable of deceit has led many commentators to argue for his exoneration. An example would be P.J. Williams, whose paper *Lying Spirits sent by God? The case of Micaiah's Prophecy* argues against the plain sense of the text that it is, in fact, Micaiah who is being criticised by the text and that YHWH is clearly blameless (Williams, 2002). A more cogent response, in my view, is given by J.J.M. Roberts (2002), in his

7 Speech-act silences, presuppositional silences, discreet silences, genre-based silences and manipulative silences.

8 This silence of YHWH might be seen as being in line with later apophatic theology.

paper *Does God Lie? Divine Deceit as a Theological Problem in Israelite Prophetic Literature*. Roberts argues that the weight of evidence across the Hebrew Bible is that YHWH reveals himself as trustworthy to those who genuinely seek truth. However:

> Can one trust God? Maybe, but only at the price of obedience and a genuine love for the truth, no matter how unpleasant that truth may be. Without those ingredients in one's response to God, the divine lie remains a distinct and terrifying possibility. (Roberts, 2002, p. 131)

This shrewd analysis neatly aligns the witness from the Micaiah account (where Ahab is seeking lies, not truth), and the incidents, identified above, where the enemies of God are duped into believing their own imaginations. Rather as the apostle Paul describes in Romans, where God is said to 'hand over'[9] sinful man to his own depravity (Rom 1:24,26,28), so throughout this carnival, YHWH appears to be the player who allows people to hear what they wish to hear.

This understanding of YHWH as the God who may trick people has also been described by Peter Leithart. As he perceptively says of the role of YHWH in II Kings 3, in a quotation which I used at the top of this chapter:

> Why would great wrath come upon Israel after a human sacrifice? What we can say with confidence is that Yahweh is a God who sets traps, not only for Gentile Moabites, but for Israelites. He is an equal-opportunity trapper. Yahweh lures Moab into a false assurance of victory with the combination of water and sunrise, but he is simultaneously luring J[]oram into false confidence in a battle that ultimately turns against him. (Leithart, 2006, p. 180)

It may be helpful at this point to recall the work of the speech-act theorists who describe how an utterance can have locutionary meaning, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary effect (Austin, 1975, pp. 94–120).

So let us consider for a moment the reported words of YHWH related by Micaiah 'Who will entice Ahab? (I. 22:20)', and YHWH's words in response to the offer to put a lying spirit into the mouths of the prophets, 'You will entice and also you will be able; go out and do so' (v. 22). The locutionary meaning seems transparent. However the illocutionary force of the statements is revealed—as Moberly has shown, though without using these terms—as

9 παραδιδωμι.

Ahab, you are allowing yourself to be deceived (Moberly, 2003). The perlocutionary effect, then, is the unmasking of Ahab's gullibility.

Likewise, as I argued in chapter 4, in the instances where YHWH appears to deceive his enemies, particularly the Arameans (II. 7:6), he is in fact revealing something about the faithlessness of the king of Israel. The perlocutionary effect is perhaps that we laugh at the cowardly king and his scornful officer.

So is YHWH a player in the carnival? I would argue that he is a very active participant, sowing doubt in our mind where there was certainty, lifting the lid to reveal the dubious interiority of people's motives, and reversing the way that we see the world. Rather than being the 'voice from the sky', making monologising edicts, YHWH enters into the fray as a participant, withdraws from the fray in articulate silence, and functions as a combatant, a voice of dissent and an agent of subversion against kings and armies, even (perhaps, especially) his own.

Potential Criticisms

Before I conclude, there are some possible criticisms which could be levelled at this work, and I will address these below.

Could the Author have been this Subtle?

The consequence of the theory I have proposed is that my reader is invited to accept that there are multiple, sophisticated, sometimes conflicting voices within the text, interacting in complex ways to subvert, invert and comment upon the authorities and powers of the day. Does this necessitate an author who is fully aware of the diverse currents at play within his text? Is it too much to swallow? Or, to put the question another way: can the text have a meaning which is more than (deeper than, wider than, but not less than) the author intended?

This is not an epistemological question, but an ontological one. The epistemological question—whether an author's meaning is accessible other than through the text—has been thoroughly discussed by many scholars of various schools of thought. However, the ontological question—whether an author's (admittedly undiscoverable) intention could (theoretically and untestably) be less, or other, than the meaning of the text—has been less explored, although a number of scholars give us some thoughts *en passant*.

E.D. Hirsch has considered the question of authorial ignorance: does an author sometimes fail to know what he means? He identifies two ways by which this may occur; first, where the author has imperfect understanding of

his subject matter, and so fails to comprehend all the possible ramifications of his words (Hirsch, 1967, pp. 19–20). Secondly, Hirsch argues that:

> [T]here are usually components of an author's intended meaning that he is not conscious of. It is precisely here where an interpreter makes these intended but unconscious meanings explicit, that he can rightly claim to understand the author better than the author himself. (Hirsch, 1967, p. 21)

He suggests one particular way in which an author may unconsciously mean something, even though Hirsch defines meaning as a matter of consciousness (Hirsch, 1967, p. 48). An author may make a statement about a category, some members of which he is unaware of: he conceived his meaning as a whole and only later realises that this unattended meaning falls within this (bounded) whole, or *type* (Hirsch, 1967, pp. 48ff.).

New Testament scholar Mitchell Kim (2012), has drawn on the work of Michael Polanyi (1958) to address a similar question. Polanyi's work in the area of epistemology has been particularly helpful with regard to what he terms 'latent knowledge': 'We know more than we can tell' (Polanyi, 1967, p. 4). Authorial intention, suggests Kim, may therefore encompass more than the conscious attention of the author at the time of writing; there is a deeper level of so-called latent, or tacit, knowledge, which 'helps us to see that inattentive intentionality should not be regarded as some inferior mode of reference; indeed it is part and parcel of all communicative intentions' (Kim, 2012, p. 121).

Kevin Vanhoozer, in his magisterial defence of textual meaning *Is there a meaning in this text?*, seems to accept the possibility that the author's 'intention' might be broader than his immediate focus of attention.[10] This argument is redolent of Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980), where every utterance takes place within a web of prior texts, and so every utterance since the first is intertext, even when the author is not conscious of that intertext.

I therefore conclude that it is possible, ontologically, for a text to have a meaning which is more than the author intended (even though epistemologically that intention is inaccessible). However, there is an additional point, particular to the type of text we are dealing with. It should not be overlooked that all current and recent theories of literature are primarily related to texts

10 Vanhoozer develops the thinking of John Searle (1969, pp. 22ff.) and rephrases authorial intention as 'in tending'. In other words, the intention of the author has the dual sense of: ' "inclining" or "straining towards" on the one hand, and "taking care of" on the other' (Vanhoozer, 1998, p. 247).

written by a single author.[11] However, if the 'author' is not a single individual writing within a known and limited period of time; if the 'author' is a number of individuals, writing at unspecified periods quite distant from one another; if the text has experienced a sequence of redactions by individuals or schools with their own particular theological and ideological priorities—how then are we to consider our question of meaning and authorial intention? Are we asking whether the *final redactor* has to be aware of every strand of polemic and counter-polemic which is within his text? Or that the composers of the original sources were aware of them? And, come to that, who are the original source composers—the scribes who first codified the words into text, or the originators of the oral traditions?

While it is possible to merge the complex redactional history into a sort of ideal author, and to ask the question of this composite figure, this may be an unnecessary step in our own question. In fact, I would argue that it is the very complexity of the text which permits a layering of meanings which may not all have been apparent at every stage of its composition. Just as we have resisted the urge to rely too heavily on historical-critical dissection of the text, so we should, perhaps, avoid the temptation to assume a single ideal author for the purpose of this philosophical enquiry.

The intelligent author I have argued for would have been aware of many of these layers and nuances, and deliberately permitted them to remain (cf. Amit, 2000, pp. 32–33). Nonetheless, it is also conceivable that there is a depth of meaning to the text which eluded some of the contributors to the authorial process. In particular, it is entirely possible that this multi-layered, multiple-authored text contains polemics which were so skilfully concealed by one author that they may not have been identified by the final redactor. The rich compositional history of our narrative has contributed to the emergence of a sophisticated, polyphonic text, whose divergent voices should not be sundered.[12]

Could the Author have Expected his Reader to be this Perceptive?

If it is appropriate to enquire whether our author must be omniscient, it is conversely necessary to ask whether he would realistically have expected his readers to be sophisticated enough to identify the subversion he intended

11 The sole exception I have identified is E.D. Hirsch, who refers briefly to the American Constitution as an example of a text whose meaning extends far beyond the 'authors' intention. In fact, Hirsch does not make reference to its multi-authored provenance, but he identifies it as a unique genre whose peculiar legal and precedent-setting function is certainly a product of its collective authorship.

12 Cf. Alter, 1992, p. 4.

within his text. A corollary to this is the next question; if these subversive layers are genuinely present, why have so few interpreters through the centuries perceived them?

David Carr has persuasively demonstrated that the texts of the Hebrew Bible were transmitted orally as well as in written form, with multiple retellings and re-hearings (Carr, 2011). It is in the repetition of narrative that deeper meanings emerge. A perspective that might not be evident on first, second or third hearing can suddenly slide into focus on the twentieth, or hundredth hearing.

I have argued above that contemporary scholars sometimes fail to ascribe intelligence and subtlety to the ancient author. Likewise, it is quite possible for us to underestimate the perspicacity of the original reader or hearer. It is likely that the original audience would have been much more sensitive than we are to undercurrent, irony or allusion, immersed as they were in the tradition and culture of the text. I discussed in chapter 1 the problems which modern readers can have in detecting elements such as humour in the text, but also considered evidence from Melissa Jackson and Willie van Heerden that the attentive modern reader is able to develop sensitivity to at least some of its concealed elements.

Why has the Reading Remained Undetected Previously?

Why, then, if the reading I have proposed is valid, does it now appear to be novel?

First, the subversion, irony and parody which I have identified can be uncomfortable for the devout reader. We saw, for example, in chapter 2 that, until the advent of higher criticism, the commentators appear to be keen to smooth away any discomfort at Elisha's actions in the narrative of the bears. The piety which motivated such a reading will hinder the detection of subversive elements in the text.

Second, if early translators and commentators missed the humour in the text, the humourless translations and interpretations are likely to be transmitted from one generation of writings to the next. A similar conditioning has been described, for example, by Walter Wink, who argues that an ideologically motivated mistranslation of Matthew 5:39 has been propagated through subsequent translations (Wink, 1998, p. 100).[13]

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13 Wink is incorrect in his implication that the Authorised (King James) Version is the first (English) translation of the verse in the way he objects to. It is translated similarly by the Tyndale Bible, which predates the Authorised Version by almost a century. Nonetheless, Wink's point about one translation conditioning subsequent ones remains valid.

Third, as I have discussed throughout, efforts have probably been made during the compositional process of the text to conceal, at least partly, the subversive strain. It is by the very nature of subversion and destabilisation that it is whispered rather than shouted. This has been effectively demonstrated by James Scott and Yairah Amit. The concealment of the subversive elements is in keeping with the way that a critical voice might 'go underground' at certain times in a text's history in order to remain undetected (Amit, 2000, p. 97; Scott, 1990, p. xii). This permits a certain element of 'plausible deniability'. In a similar manner, I argued in chapter 4 that using the device of character anonymity enables the author to 'smear' the whole class represented by that character while disingenuously distancing himself from a specific critique against one individual.

Thus, because the author took pains to conceal them, and the reader is often predisposed to overlook them, subversive voices within our text could plausibly have remained hidden and yet have been genuinely present all along.

Are the Features Just Indicative of Source Diversity?

A fourth possible objection, which I have already considered briefly in chapter 3, is whether the clustering of seriocomic features within the central section of Kings is simply an artefact of the different sources from which they arise.

The methodological problem of whether to interpret the significance of grammatical peculiarities as indicative of source diversity or literary purpose has been identified elsewhere, for example Randall Buth, (1994), who considers the problem with relation to the nonsequential *wayyiqtol*. Buth argues that features which might be viewed as clumsy grammatical artefacts of a seam in the text have been permitted by the final author to remain because of the literary effect that they achieve. Likewise, I would argue that there is no conflict between the approaches of the source critical and the final-form critic. As I discussed briefly in chapter 4, the distinction is between the *aetiology* of stylistic diversity and its *theological or literary effect*.

Hence, for example, the presence of Aramaisms within the narratorial portions of the text, taken in addition to the apparently northern focus of this central section, render it almost indisputable that the source is distinct from that of many other parts of Kings. However, that these grammatical peculiarities were not ironed out by later redactors (as many of them were in the *qere* of the Masorah Parva, for instance) suggests that they also serve a literary purpose rather than being mere artefacts. The increased prevalence of grammatical idiosyncrasies within direct speech, which I demonstrated using the χ-squared statistical test, is a suggestion that the speech of Elisha and others within the

narrative is being deliberately foreignised or allowed to remain foreign-sounding by the redactor.

Thus, the multiplicity of voices and styles found within the text lends weight to the proposition that it is an anti-monologic text, and provides plausibility for the suggestion that there may be subversive elements at play.

Far from weakening the evidence for my hypothesis, the presence of such 'unsmoothed' northern texts should be considered highly significant—voices from the past co-opted by the author to critique his present.

Concluding Remarks

The world of Kings is a world of grand temples, ivory palaces and sweeping political manoeuvres. This is a world where the rich rule and the poor serve them, where the 'goodies' are good and the 'baddies' are bad. Into this world comes the carnival, led by Elijah and Elisha. Not for them the role of dignified elder statesman, the role of leaders of the opposition. Into the orderly, right-way-up world of Israel and Judah, they introduce a chaotic, turbulent element, a rumbustious, playful chaos, where nothing is as it seems, nothing is as you expect it to be. In this upside-down world, brave men are found to be cowardly, men of God are revealed as egotists, enemies can become friends, and friends may stab you in the back. Here, bizarre things happen: ravens may bring you food, bears may attack unexpectedly, lions may seek you out and kill you. Here, axes float, and fires break out all over the place. Here, violent death is common and may take any number of forms. You might be sacrificed by your father, beheaded with your brothers, eaten by your mother, stoned on the orders of a queen, suffocated by your servant, or eaten by dogs. You *can* be sure there will be a great deal of blood. This upside-down world is not a world of marble floors and ivory thrones, it is a world filled with the common stuff of everyday life, of cooking pots and oil and flour and wild herbs, of stews and bread, of lamps and beds and chairs. Here, kings may be foolish or cowardly, and prophets may fail to hear the word of God. Not in this world the grandiose speeches of the statesman or professional prayer-smith. Here, people moan and grumble, exaggerate and whine, curse and take oaths. Here, anything might happen—and it probably will. In this world, little is certain, few can be trusted, and no-one—peasant, king or prophet—is without fault or folly.

APPENDIX 1

The χ-squared Test Applied to Rendsburg's Findings of Variant Linguistic Features in the Northern Narratives of Kings*

The χ-squared test is a standard statistical test which may be used to determine the likelihood that two sets of discrete data share the same frequency distribution. In other words, it is used to test the 'goodness of fit' between observed and expected phenomena. For example, 200 tosses of a coin might produce 110 heads and 90 tails. The χ-squared test will test whether the coin is behaving like a 'true', unbiased coin or not.

In order to conduct the test, a 'null hypothesis' is made, which states that there is no statistical difference between the two sets of results. On the basis of the null hypothesis, the expected results are calculated. In the example of the coin toss above, the expected results would be 100 heads and 100 tails. The following calculation is then performed:[1]

	Data set 1	**Data set 2**	**Total**
O Observed value			
E Expected value			Should equal total of observed results above
O-E			Should equal zero
$(O-E)^2$ /E			**This total is designated X**

The figure X is then compared to the following standard table of χ^2 values below, which tells us how likely it is that the null hypothesis is true. If the probability of the null hypothesis being true is less than 0.05 (5%), then there is said to be a *statistically significant difference* between the two sets of data.

* I am indebted to Dr Anna Long for her advice on the correct way to apply this test.

1 Yates's correction is not necessary in the tests performed, so has not been included here.

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Degrees of freedom[2] (= number of categories being compared, minus one)	**Probability that the null hypothesis is true**		
	0.05	**0.01**	**0.001**
1	3.84	6.64	10.83

So, for example, if the X value obtained were 7.00, the probability of the null hypothesis being true would be between 0.01 and 0.001, which indicates strong statistical significance.

In the situation in chapter 4, we are comparing the frequency of a particular set of linguistic phenomena within narrative and direct discourse in the northern texts of Kings. Rendsburg's findings were that 80 'northern' features were found within 419 verses of narrative, compared with 81 found within 281 verses of discourse. A necessary assumption is made that the size of the verses is similar in narrative and discourse.[3] The χ-squared test has therefore been applied as follows:

> 419 of the 700 verses are narrative (= 59.9%), with the remaining 281 being discourse (= 40.1%).

Therefore, if the null hypothesis is correct, we would expect that the 'northern' features would be evenly distributed throughout narrative and discourse. So the expected split would be 59.9% within narrative, 40.1% within discourse. From this our expected results are calculated:

> 59.9% of 161 = 96.4 expected in narrative
> 40.1% of 161 = 68.6 expected in direct discourse

2 In both the example above, and the calculation below, there are two categories (heads/tails; narrative/discourse), so the number of degrees of freedom is 1. Therefore only this part of the table is reproduced here.

3 Cursory inspection would suggest that, if anything, the discourse verses are shorter than the narrative ones. The test may therefore *under*estimate the linguistic difference between the text forms.

The calculation may now be performed as follows:

	Narrative	Direct Discourse	Total
O	80	81	161
E	96.4	64.6	161
O-E	−16.4	16.4	0
$(O-E)^2/E$	2.79	4.16	**X = 6.95**

Applying this result for X to the table above, we see that the probability of the null hypothesis being true is between 0.01 and 0.001, i.e. the difference between the two data sets is statistically significant.

For Rendsburg's second set of data, the distribution of 'northern' features within and without the Elijah/Elisha narratives, the calculation is as follows.

368 non-Elijah/Elisha verses : 332 Elijah/Elisha verses = 52.6% : 47.4%

There are 161 'northern' features, so if the null hypothesis is true, the expected split would be 84.7 : 76.3

	Non-Elijah/Elisha	Elijah/Elisha	Total
O	73	88	161
E	84.7	76.3	161
O-E	−11.7	11.7	0
$(O-E)^2/E$	1.62	1.79	**X = 3.41**

Thus this does not achieve statistical significance.

APPENDIX 2

Seriocomic Events of the Central Part of Kings, Itemised by Chapter

1. 16	Drunken king v. 9	Feasting
	Coup v. 10	Inversion
	Human sacrifice v. 24	Transgression of bodily boundaries
	Suicide of Zimri v. 18	Inversion
1. 17	Drought v. 1	Fantasticality
	Elijah fed by birds v. 6	Fantasticality
	Miraculous provision vv. 13–16	Fantasticality, Feasting
	Revivification vv. 22–23	Fantasticality
1. 18	Obadiah's querulous speech vv. 9–14	Linguistic transgression
	Ahab's insult v. 17	Linguistic transgression
	Elijah's mockery v. 27	Linguistic transgression
	Fire from heaven v. 38	Fantasticality
	Mass slaughter v. 34	Transgression of bodily boundaries
1. 19	Jezebel's threat v. 2	Linguistic transgression
	Miraculous provision vv. 6–7	Fantasticality, Feasting
	Theophany vv. 11–13	Fantasticality
1. 20	Flyting vv. 1 0–11	Linguistic transgression
	Ben-Hadad's drinking vv. 12,16	Feasting
	Drunken speech v. 18	Linguistic transgression
	The 'lads' lead the battle vv. 14,15,19	Inversion
	Hyperbolic numbers, mass death vv. 29–30	Fantasticality, Transgression of bodily boundaries
	Aram repents in sackcloth vv. 31–32	Inversion
	Disguised prophet v. 35	Masking
	Mauling by a lion v. 35	Transgression of bodily boundaries

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I. 21	Illegal stoning	Transgression of bodily boundaries
	Dogs licking blood vv. 19,23,24	Transgression of bodily boundaries
	Exchange of insults vv. 20–24	Linguistic transgression
	Ahab repents in sackcloth v. 27	Inversion
I. 22	Kings initially in festal robes, defeated vv. 10,35	Inversion
	Lying spirit/Micaiah as Fool	Masking
	Insult/blow v. 24	Linguistic Transgression
	Disguise v. 30	Masking
	Blood flowing, dogs licking vv. 35–38	Transgression of bodily boundaries
II. 1	Fire from heaven vv. 10,12	Fantasticality ×2, Transgression of bodily boundaries ×2
II. 2	Parting the Jordan vv. 8,14	Fantasticality ×2
	Elijah's translation v. 11	Fantasticality
	Healing the water v. 21	Fantasticality
	Youths insult Elisha v. 23	Linguistic transgression
	Bears obey the prophet v. 24	Fantasticality
	Bears maul youths v. 34	Transgression of bodily boundaries
II 3	Elisha's insult v. 14	Linguistic transgression
	Incompletely fulfilled prophecy v. 19 cf. v. 27	Masking
	Human sacrifice v. 37	Transgression of bodily boundaries
II. 4	Miraculous provision v. 5	Fantasticality
	Miraculous birth v. 17	Fantasticality
	Revivification vv. 34–35	Fantasticality
	Healing the stew v. 41	Fantasticality, Feasting
	Miraculous provision vv. 43–44	Fantasticality, Feasting
II. 5	Naaman the great warrior humbled	Inversion
	Miraculous healing v. 14	Fantasticality
	Miraculous affliction v. 27	Fantasticality

II. 6	Recovering the axe-head v. 6	Fantasticality
	Horses and chariots of fire v. 15	Fantasticality
	Supernatural sight or blindness vv. 17,18,20	Fantasticality ×3
	Deception v. 19	Masking
	Warriors overcome by unarmed prophet	Inversion
	Stuttering speech v. 21	Linguistic transgression
	Lepers as Fools	Masking
	Unexpected feast v. 23	Feasting
	Cannibalism v. 29	Feasting, Transgression of bodily boundaries
II. 7	Lepers are wise, king is foolish	Inversion
	Deceptive hallucination v. 6	Masking
	Lepers feast v. 8	Feasting
	Townspeople feast vv. 16–17	Feasting
	Proud officer trampled to death vv. 2,17–20	Transgression of bodily boundaries, Inversion
II. 8	Deceit v. 10	Masking
	Coup vv. 14–15	Inversion
	Murder by suffocation v. 15	Transgression of bodily boundaries
II. 9	The 'nobody' anoints Jehu vv. 1–11	Inversion
	Jehu dissembles to his fellow officers vv. 11–12	Masking
	Jehu drives like a madman	Inversion
	Insults vv. 22,34	Linguistic transgression ×2
	Ignominious death of Joram vv. 24–26	Inversion, Transgression of bodily boundaries
	Bloody death of Jezebel v. 33	Transgression of bodily boundaries
	Jezebel as dung v. 37	Transgression of bodily boundaries,
	Jezebel's toilette before her ignominious death vv. 30,33	Inversion
	Feasting over Jezebel's body v. 34	Feasting

II. 10	Heads in baskets vv. 7–8	Transgression of bodily boundaries
	Mass slaughter vv. 11,14,25	Transgression of bodily boundaries ×3
	The commoner in the royal chariot vv. 15,16	Inversion
	Jehu lies to trap prophets of Baal vv. 18–24	Masking
	Priests enrobed before their slaughter vv. 22,25	Inversion
	Temple of Baal becomes a latrine v. 27	Profanation, Transgression of bodily boundaries
	Abrupt reversal of Jehu's expansion v. 32	Inversion
II. 11	Proud Athaliah slaughtered	Inversion, Transgression of bodily boundaries
II. 12	Abrupt reversal of Joash's temple improvements vv. 17–18	Inversion
II. 13	Sympathetic magic of the arrows vv. 18–19	Fantasticality
	Revivification v. 21	Fantasticality

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